THE RELEVANCE FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY BRITISH METHODIST CLASS MEETING

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the Faculty of the School of Theology

at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

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by

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ABSTRACT

The problem with which this project attempts to deal is centered around the dilemma of the contemporary American church. The church today is in need of spiritual renewal as well as in need of developing an awakening social concern. These two aspects of renewal are not in opposition to one another but are in fact parts of the general need for church renewal. The church, however, has not always understood them to be two dimensions of the same overall problem. Instead, concern for social issues and concern for pietistic practices have often been viewed as being in opposition to one another when in reality they are the same concern but expressed in different terms.

History reveals that these two concerns were not always separated in the church's understanding. A review of church history indicates that the eighteenth century British Methodist class meeting did, in fact, combine a concern for social welfare and personal spirituality. Thus, the class meeting in all of its aspects and its historical antecedents has been considered.

Today, the church is experiencing a revival in terms of the class meeting style in the form of spiritual growth groups. The growth group, including basic group theory and three distinctive types, is examined to consider its viability as a modern paradigm for the blending of spirituality and social concern within the life of the church.

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The class meeting as an historical paradigm and the contemporary spiritual growth group have much to contribute in terms of insights and understandings in order to accomplish a merger of spiritual growth and social witness. The lessons obtained from each are not only positive but negative as well and thus contribute a great deal toward a resolution of the problem.

The research method for the project was in the form of documentary research with an emphasis upon primary source documents especially in regard to the class meeting. An historical review of the class meeting was done, the contemporary growth group was considered, and an analysis of distinctive characteristics and contributions of each was accomplished.

The project reveals that the class meeting was a place where the dual concerns of personal spirituality and social welfare were practiced. The contemporary growth group, as well, is a place where these two concerns can be merged. Thus, there is much to be learned from history in addition to psychological insights from contemporary group theory. The growth group is a particular group type that can facilitate spiritual growth and concern for social issues in the contemporary church.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

All too often in the church today we seek to mobilize our congregations only on specific social issues rather than to maintain a constant social awareness of the world of which the church is a part. A consequence of the former methodology is that with each new social issue it is necessary to regroup and to create a new sense of urgency and accompanying responsibility.

How can we create a climate within the local church in which the members have an involvement in and a concern for social issues? We often define the very concept of social issues only in terms of such wide-scale topics as racism, world hunger, and peace. Yet the church also has a need to be concerned as well with such social issues that are closer to home as caring relationships between people, penal reform, and a whole gamut of other issues that also have an impact upon persons in our contemporary society.

In addition, the contemporary American church has a need to adequately reunite the often varying missional priorities of personal piety and social responsibility. It is these two parallel concerns that are either at war with one another, or one is done to the exclusion of the other. Both, however, are vital and legitimate expressions of the Christian faith.

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THE PROBLEM

The church today is in need of spiritual renewal and of developing an awakening social concern. In order to deal with this twofold problem, we intend to explore the possible contribution of the early Methodist class meeting in England, and of psychological understandings in contemporary growth groups. To this end, we have done an historical review, an analysis of distinctive characteristics, and an evaluation of possible modern contributions.

The problem then with which this project attempts to deal is centered around the need to reawaken a sense of social concern in the contemporary church. An accompanying consideration is to relate this newly discovered concern for social issues with the traditional concern for pietistic practices. Both are derivative from our Christian faith and both are vital to it since one complements the other.

The dilemma is heightened when we consider that the church today is in the midst of an identity crisis. It is a crisis based upon the development in church thought of a false dichotomy in terms of missional understanding. We are faced with the seemingly clear choice between personal piety on the one hand and Christian social responsibility on the other hand.

Howard Clinebell deals with this dilemma and phrases a solution in the following manner:

> The Everestlike Issue that now towers over mankind is life--its quality, perhaps even its survival. The perspective of moon flights has sharpened our awareness that

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> our spaceship "earth" is a small, precious oasis of life in the vast, frigid void of cosmic space. Can we make it a place where life can flourish for all our fellow passengers? A place where the possibilities of a fully developed life will not be crushed for millions by poverty, disease, injustice, violence, ignorance, and despair? . . . How can our churches make religion what it should be--an experience of liberation, healing, and fulfillment of the spirit?[1] How can we awaken the joy, the lift, the celebration?

Clinebell sees the problem then as being one of quality of life. The phrase, "quality of life," includes both a concern for the issues surrounding human survival and for those issues that deal with the intangible aspects of life such as joy of living and inner healing. For Clinebell, there is no dichotomy but rather both are different aspects of the same problem.

Harvey Cox, discusses the same problem in terms of the thought of C. A. van Peursen. According to van Peursen, we are in a period of functional thinking. The question for today is not what something is but rather how that something functions. In such an understanding there is no dichotomy between private religious experience and social witness. "Jesus says he <u>is</u> the truth and that his followers should <u>do</u> the truth. He constantly gauged truth by what people did rather than what they said."[2] We are to not only deal with our faith on an intellectual level but to act on the faith thus professed as well.

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[1]Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., <u>The People Dynamic</u> (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 1-2.

[2]Harvey Cox, <u>The Secular City</u> (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 58.

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There is, however, one inherent danger with any attempt to deal with an issue on a functional basis. The problem is that functional thinking can easily degenerate into "operationalism." "This hazard arises when, having isolated some particular aspect of a phenomenon for special attention, we then forget that there are other aspects."[3] The temptation has been to devote the entire effort of the church to either social witness or else to personal piety with the result that one is considered to be a more valid expression of the Christian faith than the other. When the church regards its mission in this manner it seems to have forgotten that there is more than one way to look at the same issue.

Spiritual Growth Groups

Another reason for the importance of the study is the expanded usage of spiritual growth groups in the church today. Thomas Oden states that "one of the fastest growing phenomena in our time is the encounter group"[4] and Robert Leslie notes that "an increasing number of people are finding new meaning in their church life through small sharing groups."[5] By whatever name they are known, growth

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Thomas C. Oden, The Intensive Group Experience (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 18.

[5]Robert C. Leslie, Sharing Groups in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 7.

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groups or encounter groups, these groups are having a decided impact upon the life of the church today.

The groups are varied in terms of stated purpose yet one factor is the same. "They are all dealing with the intensive group experience, utilizing the small group as the medium of interpersonal and personal growth, improved communication, and constructive behavioral change."[6]

The growth group has another vital function in the contemporary American church. As Leslie phrases it: "I see the best hope for church renewal in the small sharing group."[7] The church is in desperate need of renewal for it seems to have lost sight of its mission. Robert K. Hudnut reaches the following conclusions about the state of the contemporary church and its need for renewal:

> The church in many quarters is in trouble, and the sooner we realize it the better. When nearly two-thirds of your membership do not show up for your weekly meeting, your organization is in trouble. When your members give no more per week to alleviating world suffering--a goal for which their founder was famous--than the price of a hot dog at a ball park, your organization is in trouble. When it takes the combined efforts of ten thousand of your members to win three new members a year, then you are very close to being on the rocks. And when your organization has little to say about the great social issues of the day--from Black Power to Vietnam--it is on the rocks.[8]

The church then is in need of renewal. It needs to recapture its sense of purpose--personal growth and social

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[6]Oden, loc. cit. [7]Leslie, loc. cit.

[8]Robert K. Hudnut, The Sleeping Giant (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 1.

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change. The growth group which is an outgrowth of the human potentials movement seems to be an effective medium for the long overdue renewal.

Methodist Class Meeting

If we were to look back in history to the eighteenth century, we would find the historical antecedent to the contemporary growth group. This antecedent, the Methodist class meeting, was part and parcel of the Wesleyan Revival with its corresponding impact not only upon the established church of that time, the Church of England, but upon eighteenth century English society as well. It must be noted that although the avowed purpose of the revival was "to flee from the wrath to come," the movement was not without its impact upon society. "The fact that the social consequences were for the most part unintended does not detract from their significance."[9]

It is because the Methodist class meeting combined both personal piety and social responsibility that we will consider it as an early model of the spiritual growth group that exists in the church today. Certainly, it is hoped that much can be learned from the study of the class meeting that would be beneficial to those seeking to implement a similar style of small group experience in the contemporary church.

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[9]Frederick A. Norwood, The Story of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 25.

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THESIS

The early Methodist class meeting with its emphasis upon personal piety brought about a corresponding indirect impact upon the individual's sense of social responsibility as s/he went through the process of attempting to live a life that was essentially Christian. Indeed, the basis for this concern for the world is based upon John Wesley's conviction that "the Gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness."[10] Roughly translated, this passage means that the Methodist Revival was concerned with ". . . not only souls, but bodies also; that is, to save men, not only for the next world, but for this one as well."[11]

The contemporary American church has much to learn from this historic attempt as the church becomes more and more involved with the usage of growth groups. Leslie summarizes the reasons for contemporary interest in the early class meeting in the following manner:

> Indeed, many of the characteristics of the class meeting commend themselves to us with a new relevance today: sharing fellowship, the therapeutic concern, the lay leadership, the agreement to be present at the weekly sessions, the detailed inquiry into "how things are going," the willingness of the group members to submit themselves to a group evaluation, and, above all the common loyalty to Jesus of Nazareth.[12]

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[10]Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 25.

[11]Ibid, p. 26.

[12]Leslie, p. 206.

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It is for these reasons that the church today needs to take a look at the Methodist class meeting as an instrument of both revival and renewal.

LIMITATIONS

In dealing with a topic of this magnitude, it is of course necessary to place some limitations on the scope of the endeavor. These limitations will be focused in four areas and are as follows: (1) type of class meeting, (2) nature of the inquiry, (3) Wesleyan biographical material, and (4) types of contemporary growth groups.

Type of Class Meeting

This first limitation on the topic is extremely essential as there are in reality two distinct types of class meetings. The distinction to be made is along the lines of both national origin as well as historical context. It is for this reason that we can differentiate between the class meeting as it existed in eighteenth century England and as it existed on the American frontier.

The class meeting in England arose within the socio-historical context of eighteenth century British society and had an impact upon both society and the established church. The American class meeting developed and had an impact upon a neophyte society and a church that was not yet established and that was in fact in the birth process.

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It is for this reason of differing contexts that this project will focus primarily upon the British class meeting since it had an effect upon both an established society and an established church. This is the corresponding position in which growth groups find themselves in the contemporary American church. They too are in the position of having to deal with an entrenched society and church.

There will, however, be a brief consideration of the American experience with the class meeting. Perhaps in America, the class meeting met with differing circumstances and a somewhat different fate than did its British cousin due to the obvious variant conditions in the American church and society.

Nature of the Inquiry

As it may be surmised, the very nature of this inquiry will deal with the sociological and the historical factors that led to the development, life, and eventual demise of the class meeting. Since the study will take this direction, there will be little discussion of the underlying theological basis for the class meeting. However by necessity, there may be some need to refer to a particular theological understanding that directly relates to some facet of the class meeting. For example, it will in all probability be necessary to refer to the doctrine of Christian perfection since it is this one doctrine in particular that will do much to explain why the class meeting functioned as it did. When

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this need should arise, an understanding of the doctrine or teaching in question will be assumed and not be delineated in this paper.

Wesleyan Biographical Material

Although the nature of the inquiry will be primarily socio-historical, it will be necessary to place some further limitation upon the parameters of the investigation. In particular, there will be no explicit discussion of the details of the life of the founder of the Methodist Revival, John Wesley. A detailed discussion of Wesley's background is beyond the scope of this project. However, Wesley's life will be considered only as it directly bears on the history and direction of the class meeting. Thus, Wesley's life and the history of the class meeting will be treated as separate histories and will only be considered together when one impinges upon the other. For example, those factors that led Wesley to the formation of the class meeting will be discussed as they directly affect the development of the class meeting. Also, those directions and instructions that Wesley dispenses as the leader of the revival to the classes will also need to be considered since they too have a direct impact.

Types of Contemporary Growth Groups

A final limitation has to do with the types of growth groups that exist in the church today. Clinebell

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lists twenty-three different types of growth groups. They range from "youth groups to work through unfinished personal identity" to "action-growth groups with a dual focus on personal development and training for some significant task" to "spiritual growth groups aimed primarily at group interaction around meaning, values, and other religious growth issues" to "bereavement recovery groups."[13] Given this wide array of group types, we will focus on only three types that directly bear on the stated problem of combining personal piety and social responsibility. First to be considered will be those groups organized solely for spiritual growth. Second, those groups whose primary purpose is social action will be discussed. Finally, we will consider those groups which are organized for the dual purpose of personal growth and social action.

BASIC DEFINITIONS

There are several basic definitions which the reader needs to grasp in order to adequately deal with the chapters to follow. These are terms that will frequently appear in the discussion.

Conventicle

This is probably one of the most basic terms to be employed in this project. Quite simply, it refers to any

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[13]Clinebell, p. 11.

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meeting for religious purposes outside the established church or the legal state religion or the accepted religion of the time. Such meetings were held by the dissenters in England and Scotland during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As we shall see, the conventicle, especially its legal and social status, played a major role in determining the public and religious acceptance of the Methodist classes in England.

Religious Society

The religious society was a fact of English religious life in the eighteenth century as well as in the two centuries prior to that time. The stated purpose of these societies at the outset was to promote true holiness of heart and life for those individuals who wished a deeper religious experience than they found in the Church of England. In addition, these societies had humanitarian aims such as caring for the poor.

The societies existed within the structure of the Church of England parish system and thus were under the supervision of the parish priest. They were, however, independent of the parish for all matters except the sacraments for which the individual society member was still dependent upon the Anglican Church. In addition there were other restrictions such as an injunction against meeting on Sunday so as to not compete with the parish worship services.

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It is into this rubric that the Methodist United Societies fit and were a part. In the eyes of the Church of England, the Methodist societies were just another religious society under the care of the parish priest.

Bands

The institution of the band was the initial division that Wesley incurred in the life of the United Societies. The concept of the band was an innovation that Wesley utilized from his contact with the Moravians at Herrnhut. While everyone was a member of the society, a number of those were further subdivided into bands.

The bands were organized along two lines. There were bands segregated along the lines of sex. In addition, there were bands created along the lines of individual progress or lack thereof in spiritual development. That is, there were bands for those who had made exceptional gains in their spiritual life and bands for those who had moved in a negative direction.

Class Meeting

While the bands were the initial subdivision within the United Societies, they were gradually supplanted by the class meeting. The class meeting became the basic unit of membership within a local society. It included members of both sexes, and one had to be a member of a class in order to be a member of a society. Thus, the class meeting became the principal unit of membership within the revival.

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Growth Groups

While this is not the point at which to get involved with an extensive discussion of growth groups, it is necessary to indicate some sort of preliminary definition of the term. On a very basic level, a growth group is a small, intensely interacting group formed as a ". . . medium of interpersonal and personal growth, improved communication, and constructive behavioral change."[14] More detailed discussion of the growth group will appear in Chapter 3.

METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

Methodology

The basic methodology for this project will be documentary research. The primary source for information on the class meeting will, of course, be the writings of John Wesley and in particular the Journal.[15] For information about the predecessors to the class meeting, John Wesley and the Religious Societies[16] will be consulted. Other secondary sources will be consulted as necessary.

Information regarding growth groups will be gleaned

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[14]Oden, p. 18.

[15]John Wesley, The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. (London: Epworth Press, 1960).

[16]John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies (London: Epworth Press, 1921).

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from such sources as Howard Clinebell's The People Dynamic[17] and Carl Rogers' On Encounter Groups.[18]

Organization

The project will be organized along the following lines. Chapter 2 will deal with the class meeting, including its historical context and development, its organization, its function, and its impact upon society and the church. Chapter 3 will deal with growth groups in contemporary America, including the background in current interest and the theory behind three types of groups. Chapter 4 will relate the learnings from the class meeting and the growth groups to one another. The chapter will also include a comparison between eighteenth century England and twentieth century America as well as recommendations for the contemporary church.

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[17] Clinebell.

[18] Carl R. Rogers, Carl Rogers on Encounter Groups (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

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Chapter 2

THE CLASS MEETING

By 1739, the Methodist Revival was already well under way in England. It was in this same year that John Wesley announced the formation of the first United Society as the result of a theological altercation with the Moravians. The United Society was formed with the intention of placing Wesley in direct control over the spiritual and temporal affairs of the society members. Simon reports that on Tuesday, February 24, Wesley assembled the society members ". . . and read over the list of the names of 'The United Society,' being determined that no 'disorderly walker' should remain in it."[1]

It would seem then that all was well within the new revival for Wesley now had direct control over the United Societies. These were in turn further divided into bands for those who had made exceptional progress in their spiritual lives. Yet Simon reports on Wesley's feelings just three years later in 1742. He writes:

> He was deeply concerned by the failure of so many in London, Bristol, and Kingswood who had not "adorned the gospel of Christ," and he had come to the conclusion that such failures might be prevented or lessened in number if a more efficient method of association and supervision could be discovered. . . . His thoughts ran in

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[1]John S. Simon, John Wesley and the Methodist Societies (London: Epworth Press, 1952), p. 40.

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> the direction of a plan which would make the members of the Societies the guardians and helpers of each other; but, for a time, no steady light fell on his perplexing problem.[2]

It appears then that at least in Wesley's mind not all was well within the revival and it was not until the advent of the class meeting that the dilemma would be resolved. As we shall later see, this crowning achievement of the Wesleyan movement, the class meeting, was not conceived in the mind of John Wesley but rather through the thoughts of one of the society members.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Before we can begin to look at the class meeting itself we must first examine it within its historical context. The roots of the class meeting lie deep within the pietistic movement itself. In fact, it is the considered opinion of Rupert Davies that Methodism, which found its characteristic expression in the class meeting, has deep historic roots. Yet this Methodism as it appeared in England would prove itself to be far different from anything that had appeared before it in history. As Davies phrases it:

> Yet Anglo-Saxon Methodism was not simply the recurrence of a religious phenomenon of deep and lasting importance which had appeared from time to time in the history of the Church. It was that, certainly, but it had complex origins; and the setting in which it arose placed on it

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[2]Ibid, pp. 62-63.

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> a stamp which makes it different from anything which has happened before or since.[3]

With this thought in mind let us begin by delving into the not too distant past. The German pietism of the seventeenth century as expressed in the conventicles created by Phillip Jakob Spener affords one of the best early examples of the genesis of the Methodist class meeting.

German Pietism - Phillip Jakob Spener

It is a sad but true fact that pietism is one of the least understood as well as one of the most criticized movements in Christian history. Stoeffler writes that "late in the seventeenth century the very caustic Pastor Mayer of Hamburg condemned it roundly because he felt that it was infected with Pelagian, Papistic, Socinian, Quakerish, and Arminian heresises."[4] It is for this very reason that we must understand pietism before we can examine the impact of Phillip Jakob Spener's work.

Pietism. To be properly understood, pietism needs to be seen as ". . . a major reform movement, the influence of which made itself felt in various phases of Protestantism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and remained an important source of whatever religious dynamic

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[3]Rupert E. Davies, Methodism (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), p. 23.

[4]F. Ernest Stoeffler, The Rise of Evangelical Pietism (Leiden: Brill, 1965), p. 1.

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was developed by Protestants around the world since that time."[5] This reform movement whose impact was chiefly extension of the reform principle to the Christian life was seen by its founders as "the second phase of the Reformation."[6]

Pietism has four characteristic emphases which are the experiential, perfectionistic, Biblical, and oppositive. By experiential is meant ". . . that the essence of Christianity is to be found in the personally meaningful relationship of the individual to God."[7] Biblical refers to the inherent trust in scripture over and above reason. "The theory was, of course, that the Spirit of God is able to commend the truth of the Bible to men's minds and hearts without the tortured interpretations of professionals."[8] It is for this reason that the opinions of untrained lay-persons were trusted by the pietists. Pietism is oppositive in that it must characteristically be against the prevailing church of the time. Thus, German pietism was opposed to what was called "religion" in the established church in Germany.

The final characteristic of pietism is perfectionistic. It seems to be the one that is the most important especially as we begin to consider the nature of the

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[5]Ibid., p. 23. [6]Ibid. [7]Ibid., p. 13.

[8]Ibid., p. 21.

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conventicle. The main emphasis in the conventicle seemed to be a deep interest in living the style of life that was professed. "What the Pietists saw, felt, and desired to accomplish in this connection must be appreciated in the light of the historic tension between the actual and the ideal, the status quo and the status ad quem."[9]

This emphasis on living the Christian life rather than just merely professing it is what can be termed perfectionistic. There was a major emphasis upon moving toward an ideal or of becoming sanctified. "A case in point was the constant reiteration in Pietistic preaching of the conviction that without conversion and sanctification the individual's Christianity is hollow and his religious profession mere sham."[10] As a result, pietism had a considerable interest in edificatory literature as a means of strengthening the devotional life. In addition, there was an emphasis upon evangelism and missionary outreach and a profound ethical sensitivity.

Spener. It is against this backdrop of Pietism that we come now to the work of Phillip Jakob Spener especially as it relates to the usage of conventicles. In 1635 Spener ". . . was born at Rappoltsweiler in Alsace and was dedicated by his parents to the service of the Church from childhood."[11]

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[9]Ibid., p. 16.

[10]Ibid., p. 17.

[11]Ibid., p. 228.

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Spener studied and lectured at the University of Strassburg from 1651 to 1659. During that time he studied under three Lutheran theologians, C. Dannhauer, Seb. Schmidt, and J. Schmid, ". . . which did not obviate the fact, however, that at Strassburg with its Reformed traditions, there was more of a disposition to pay heed to practical religious needs than in typically Lutheran centers."[12]

After further study at Basel, Geneva, and Tubingen, Spener preached for a time at Strassburg before he accepted the position of pastor and senior of the magesterium at Frankfurt on Main in 1666. It was while he was at Frankfurt that "in 1670 he began his controversial collegia pietatis and five years later published his Pia desideria."[13] It was as a result of these efforts that he became known as the central symbol of Pietism.

The collegia pietatis, from which the name "Pietist" is derived, began because of Spener's ". . . feeling very keenly the insufficiency of the formal ministrations of the State Church, . . ."[14] These conventicles were ". . . little groups of lay people who met regularly outside of service hours for religious reading, singing, prayer, and mutual edification."[15]

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[12]Ibid. [13]Ibid., p. 229.

[14]Richard M. Cameron, The Rise of Methodism (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 135.

[15]Ibid.

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Yet it was Spener's conviction that these conventicles or collegia pietatis were ecclesiolae in ecclesia and not ". . . to be a means to separate 'true' Christians from others and of imbuing the former with a pharisaical self-image."[16] They were to be an instrument of reforming the established state church and as such they embroiled Spener in a great deal of controversy.

These collegia pietatis of Spener were in a very real sense forerunners of Wesley's class meetings. The Methodist Revival was but a later edition of continental Pietism. Yet this Pietism also had an expression in seventeenth century England as well in terms of the religious societies of that time which were direct predecessors to Wesley's class meeting in terms of structure.

17th Century British Religious Societies

In 1760, Wesley indicated that he had relied upon a book entitled The Country Parson's Advice to His Parishioners as a basis for the Methodist societies that would be an integral part of the revival at a later time. Although Wesley was wrong about the date of the book since he believed it to be written during the reign of King William when in reality it was first published in 1680, his thoughts are still of importance since they establish an important link to the religious societies of the seventeenth

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[16]Stoeffler, p. 237.

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century. He writes:

> About thirty years since I met with a book written in King William's time, called The Country Parson's Advice to His Parishioners. There I read these words: "If good men of the Church will unite together in the several parts of the kingdom, disposing themselves into friendly societies, and engaging each other, in their respective combinations, to be helpful to each other in all good Christian ways, it will be the most effectual means for restoring our decaying Christianity to its primitive life and vigour, and the supporting of our tottering and sinking Church."[17]

It was this book to which Wesley referred that appeared just two years after the inauguration in 1678 of the religious societies founded by Dr. Anthony Horneck and Mr. Smithies.[18] Simon is convinced that the origin, purpose, and character of the Methodist societies is highly dependent upon these earlier attempts for "it is certain that Wesley was aware of the existence of these Societies, and was familiar with their organization."[19]

The earliest of these societies was under the care and supervision of Dr. Horneck. As the founder, Horneck had an extensive list of rules that the society members were obliged to obey. That portion of those rules as reproduced below are the ones that are of especial importance as we consider the pietistic background of the class meeting as well as precedents upon which Wesley might have drawn:

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[17]John Wesley, The Works, ed. John Emory (New York: Emory and Waugh for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1831), pp. xiii, 350-351, cited by J. S. Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies (London: Epworth Press, 1921), p. 9.

[18]Ibid., p. 10.

[19]Ibid.

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> 1. All that enter the Society shall resolve upon a holy and serious life.
> . . . . . .
> 3. They shall choose a minister of the Church of England to direct them.
> . . . . . .
> 7. The minister whom they choose shall direct what practical divinity shall be read at these meetings.
> 8. They may have liberty, after prayer and reading, to sing a psalm.
> 9. After all is done, if there be time left, they may discourse with each other about their spiritual concerns; but this shall not be a standing exercise which any shall be obliged to attend unto.
> 10. One day in the week shall be appointed for this meeting, for such as cannot come on the Lord's Day; and he that absents himself without cause shall pay threepence to the box.
> 11. Every time they meet, every one shall give sixpence to the box.
> . . . . . .
> 14. None shall be admitted into this Society without the consent of the minister who presides over it; and no apprentice shall be capable of being chosen.
> . . . . . .
> 18. The following rules are more especially recommended to the members of this Society, viz. To love one another. When reviled, not to revile again. To speak evil of no man. To wrong no man. To pray, if possible, seven times a day. To keep close to the Church of England. To transact all things peacably and gently. To be helpful to each other. To use themselves to holy thoughts in their coming in and going out. To examine themselves every night. To give every one their due. To obey superiors, both spiritual and temporal.[20]

These are the rules which greatly influenced those first religious societies, but as time passed they went through some expected changes. Although "the dominant aim of the Religious Societies was the promotion of 'real holiness of heart and life,'[21] which fact remained the same, there were some major shifts in emphasis as cited by

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[20]Hone, Lives of Eminent Christians, II, 309-310, cited by ibid., pp. 10-11.

[21]Ibid., p. 19.

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Josiah Woodward[22] which were later incorporated into the organization of the Methodist societies and class meetings.

The first change concerned that injunction by Horneck that discussion of spiritual concerns among the members of the society was not a requirement. However, as Simon notes: "There can be no doubt that such discourses occurred in the earliest meetings."[23] In fact, Woodward provided for such a discussion in the rules for his societies.[24]

An additional shift was in the area of leadership. Horneck, as we noted above, insisted that the leadership of the society could only be in the hands of a Church of England minister. There was, however, a relaxation of this rule during the reign of Queen Anne because of "the rapid multiplication of the Societies, and the difficulty of discovering a sufficient number of suitable ministers. . . ."[25] This situation led to lay leadership in those societies for which no clergy leadership could be secured.

As noted earlier, the emphasis in these societies was on holiness but the understanding of this concept was very broad indeed for "the love of God was united with the love of man."[26] There was a very real concern for the care of

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[22]Josiah Woodward, Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies, cited by ibid., pp. 12-20.

[23]Ibid., p. 17. [24]Woodward cited in Ibid.

[25]Ibid., p. 18. [26]Ibid., p. 20.

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the poor. Simon notes:

> Out of the "public stock" they relieved the individual necessities of the poor of the parish and put their children to school. They visited the poor at their homes, maintained orphan children, fixed some poor persons in a way of trade, set sundry prisoners for debt at liberty, assisted poor scholars at the University, and were greatly instrumental in establishing nearly one hundred charity schools in London, as well as others in the country. Like John Howard, they "trod an open but unfrequented path to immortality in the ardent and unintermitted exercise of Christian charity."[27]

It is in these primitive beginnings that we see the emergence of the paired concerns of personal piety and social responsibility within the religious society.

There were, in addition, two other societies founded near the beginning of the eighteenth century that expanded the scope of the societies' concern. The first of these, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, was formed on March 8, 1699. "It aimed at erecting catechetical schools in and about London; it supported Dr. Bray's scheme for promoting religion in the plantations; it arranged for the printing of good books previously taken for founding lending libraries in America."[28]

In 1701, when Dr. Bray returned from Maryland he noted that the aims of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge were too extensive for one organization so "he therefore proposed the establishment of a separate Society, whose object should be to propagate the gospel throughout the foreign possessions of the British Empire."[29] The new

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[27]Ibid. [28]Ibid., p. 21. [29]Ibid.

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society was granted a royal charter on June 27, 1701 and was given the name of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts.

The societies had another function as well which caused considerable criticism of them. Simon reports that "the Societies were closely connected with an attempt to secure the purification of the social life in England."[30] Woodward reports on these efforts.

> He tells us that about the year 1690 four or five gentlemen of the Church of England consulted together on the subject of the iniquity of the times, and resolved that they would do all that they possibly could, by the authority of our laws, to chastise and suppress those impudent vices and impieties which they saw very provoking in the sight of God and very grievous to the spirits of all good men. As some of them had made a special study of law they collected an abstract of our penal laws against vice and profaneness, and drew up such prudential rules as are fit for the legal conviction and prosecution of such as offend against them. In 1691 they induced Queen Anne, through the medium of Bishop Stillingfleet, to issue royal letters admonishing the magistrates to do their duty.[31]

As a result of these efforts the Society for the Reformation of Manners was formed in 1692.

It was a society whose membership was derived both from the Church of England and the Dissenters as well. It is this fact which serves to differentiate it from the religious societies of the time. There was, however, a second distinction which we must be careful to make. Woodward wishes us to note that ". . . the Societies for

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[30] Ibid., p. 22.

[31] Woodward, p. 54, cited in ibid.

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Reformation bent their utmost endeavors from the first to suppress public vice; whilst the Religious Societies endeavored chiefly to promote a due sense of religion in their own breasts, though they may have been eminently instrumental in the public reformation."[32]

It was against this immediate background of the religious societies in seventeenth century England that the Methodist Revival arose. We must now turn to those aspects of Wesley's own ancestry and life that caused the revival to formulate that new creation--the class meeting.

Ancestral Involvement in Religious Societies

It is within this framework of the religious societies within seventeenth century England that we now turn to examine the Wesley family history. As we shall see, the Wesley family tree will reveal several Dissenters as well as parental involvement in the religious societies of the eighteenth century.

Dissenting forebears. Even a brief cursory examination of the Wesleyan ancestors would reveal an early involvement in attempts to reform the church that would later be echoed in the ministry of John Wesley himself. Cameron reports that "one great-grandfather and two grandfathers of the founders of Methodism were ornaments of the ministry in that wing of the Puritan tradition which, while clinging as

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[32]Woodward, p. 65, cited in ibid., p. 23.

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long as possible to the national church, sought to rid it of 'the dregs of Popery,' to raise the standard of preaching, to mould Church and Nation into one Holy Community which should glorify God by pure worship and saintly living after the pattern in His Word."[33]

Bartholomew Westley who lived from 1600 to 1671 was John's great-grandfather. In 1645, he became the Vicar of Charmouth and Catherston in Dorset. During this time, ". . . he obtained considerable notoriety by attempting to prevent the escape of Charles II to France from Lyme Regis, after the battle of Worcester."[34] Under the Act of Uniformity of 1662, he was ejected from his pulpit seemingly in retaliation for his support of Cromwell against Charles II and "apparently he avoided imprisonment through the five years between his ejection and his death."[35] During his last years he earned his living as a physician for which he may have studied at Oxford.

John Wesley's paternal grandfather, John Westley, did not fare quite as well as his father, Bartholomew. Bartholomew's last days before his death at Lyme Regis ". . . were saddened by the frequent tidings of the persecutions of his beloved son, John Westley."[36] In 1662,

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[33]Cameron, p. 3.

[34]Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies, pp. 29-30.

[35]Cameron, p. 4.

[36]Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies, p. 30.

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during his time of service at Whitchurch, he was imprisoned under the same Act of Uniformity as his father for not utilizing the Book of Common Prayer in worship. For this violation, he was ultimately ejected from his pulpit. He then moved to Preston where he lived until his retirement in 1666. While at Preston, he preached to the people there and at Weymouth. "And after some time he was called by a number of serious Christians at Pool to be their pastor; and in that relation he continued to the day of his death, administering all ordinances to them as opportunity offered."[37] But even these years were not without persecution despite all of his caution for Cameron writes:

> But notwithstanding all his prudence in managing his meeting more privately than many of his brethren, he was oft disturbed, and several times apprehended, and four times imprisoned: Once at Pool for half a year, and once at Dorchester for three months; but the other confinements were not so long.[38]

Samuel Annesley, the father of Susannah Wesley who lived from 1620 to 1696, fared somewhat better than his in-laws considering the fact that he was a Noncomformist. He was highly regarded by his contemporaries which ". . . earned for him the title, 'a second St. Paul' among his colleagues."[39] He served as a chaplain in the Royal Navy and after his retirement from that position he served a parish at Cliff in Kent. "During the Protectorate his

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[37]Cameron, p. 9.

[38]Ibid., p. 10.

[39]Ibid., p. 11.

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abilities found fruitful outlet in London where he was Lecturer at St. Paul's and minister, upon presentation of Cromwell himself, at St. Giles' Cripplegate."[40] Despite his fame, he too was ejected from his pulpit in 1662, but "ten years later, however, on the proclamation of the royal Indulgence, he resumed his public ministry in an independent congregation which continued till his death."[41]

Parental involvement. While we can look to Wesley's grandfathers for influence upon the ultimate course that his revival would take, it is to his parents that we must turn for their influence upon him in terms of religious societies. As Frank Baker notes:

> John Wesley was born with religious societies in his blood. In 1700 his father had published an enthusiastic plea for their more widespread adoption, and had himself founded one at Epworth in February 1701/2. Ten years later, during the rector's absence at Convocation, Mrs. Wesley entered this field.[42]

Additionally, Dr. Simon tells us that Samuel Wesley's name was to be numbered ". . . among those of the men who were the earliest and warmest supporters of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge."[43] Indeed, "there is no

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[40]Ibid. [41]Ibid.

[42]Frank Baker, "The People Called Methodists - 3. Polity," in Rupert E. Davies and Gordon Rupp (eds.) A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain, (London: Epworth Press, 1965), I, 215-216.

[43]Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies, p. 21.

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doubt that the father handed down his sentiments on the subject to his more famous son."[44]

Yet there can be no doubt that of the two parents Susannah had the most profound effect upon John. Albert Outler describes her role in the family in the following way:

> She was both matriarch and saint, who presided with equal grace and firmness over the affairs of a large, impoverished family--mother, teacher, lodestar. She was capable of defying her husband in matters ecclesiastical and of debating with her sons on questions theological.[45]

In 1709, the rectory suffered a third fire and young John was dramatically rescued from the flames. "Susannah saw the incident as demonstrating the special interest of Divine Providence in her son, and resolved to be, as she wrote, 'more particularly careful of the soul of this child which God had so mercifully provided for.'"[46]

Even though Susannah ". . . had broken with the religious opinions of [her] parents to rejoin the national church,"[47] there can be no doubt that those same parental opinions still had a profound influence upon her and correspondingly upon young John. As we noted earlier, in 1711, Susannah led a series of Sunday evening meetings at the rectory during Samuel's extended absence. Simon shares

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[44]Ibid., p. 25.

[45]Albert C. Outler (ed.,) John Wesley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 6.

[46]Bernard Semmel, The Methodist Revolution (New York: Basic, 1973), pp. 27-28.

[47]Ibid., p. 27.

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these thoughts about that society led by Susannah that at one point included 200 persons in what was originally intended only for the children and servants:

> The description of the proceedings of the Society showed that it was conducted, with certain variations, on the lines of the Religious Societies of which Samuel Wesley was a strong supporter. In his Letter Concerning the Religious Societies, published in 1699, he argues that so far from being any injury to the Church of England they would greatly promote its interests, and he expresses a wish that such Societies might be formed in all considerable towns, and even in populous villages; and he urged the necessity of their formation on the ground that, without them, the members of the Church have no opportunity for the "delightful employment of all good Christians," pious conversation. These were his excellent sentiments, but he was alarmed by his wife's proceedings, and she had to defend herself against his objections. Her proceedings certainly did not conform, in all respects, to the "Orders" of the Religious Societies. In them we find no arrangement for the management of a Society by a woman. Mrs. Wesley was conscious of the irregularity in her own case, but was so convinced of the usefulness of her meetings that she would not discontinue them unless her husband sent his positive command, in such full and express terms as might absolve her from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good "when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ." Her husband did not send his "positive command"; so the Society continued to meet until he returned from London, when it was dissolved.[48]

The reason for Samuel's concern was the charge made by the young curate who had been left in charge that Susannah's meetings were a conventicle. The curate was no doubt motivated by reasons of jealousy created by Susannah's success in ministry and his lack thereof. Samuel was alarmed that Susannah's meetings might fall under the provisions of the Conventicle Act and would so be illegal. He

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[48]Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies, p. 62.

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was also well aware that ". . . the full rigour of the law had been exercised on the Nonconformists who had held meetings similar to those his wife was conducting, and he was alarmed when he heard that the ugly word 'conventicle' was being whispered in the streets of Epworth."[49]

Susannah then had a definite impact upon her children and especially John. These words penned by Cameron seem then more like an understatement than hyperbole:

> She was the mother not only of the Methodists, but also of Methodism. From her John and Charles got their methodical discipline, by correspondence when they were at the University, she moulded John's theology and urged on him the study of "practical divinity;" when she had but lately been widowed, she bravely sped them on their mission to Georgia; and finally, her guiding touch was apparent at critical moments when Methodism was but an infant movement feeling its way.[50]

The Holy Club

If we were to look for Wesley's first personal encounter with a religious society, we would naturally turn to the Holy Club that came into existence during his years at Oxford. It is the Holy Club that is considered to be the origin of the Methodist Revival. In addition, the Holy Club was an early experiment at what would later become the class meeting.

Charles, not John, was the real founder of this small group which came into existence during John's absence as his father's assistant at Epworth and Wroote in 1726 and 1729.

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[49]Ibid., p. 63.

[50]Cameron, p. 17.

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Upon his return to Oxford, John found ". . . that a small semimonastic group had been gathered by his brother Charles for systematic Bible study, mutual discipline in devotion and frequent Communion."[51] Additionally, the Holy Club had an interest in the ancient liturgies as well as the monastic piety of the fourth century "desert fathers."

John soon became the leader of the group. That he should be interested in such a group should come as no surprise since he wrote of those books which led him to embrace the type of religion as practiced in the Holy Club:

> In the year 1725, being in the twenty-third year of my age, I met with Bishop Taylor's Rule and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying. In reading several parts of this book I was exceedingly affected, that part in particular which relates to purity of intention. Instantly I resolved to dedicate all my life to God, all my thoughts, and words, and actions. . . .
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> . . . . . .
>
> In the year 1726 I met with Kempis's Christian Pattern. The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, now appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even all my life to God (supposing it possible to do this, and go no further) would profit me nothing unless I gave my heart, yea, all my heart to him.
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> . . . . . .
>
> A year or two after, Mr. Law's Christian Perfection and Serious Call were put into my hands. These convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian, and I determined, through His grace (the absolute necessity of which I was deeply sensible of), to be all devoted to God, to give Him all my soul, my body, and my substance.[52]

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[51] Outler, p. 8.

[52] John Wesley, Christian Perfection (Cleveland: World, 1954), pp. 3-4.

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With interests such as these, it seems natural that John should be interested in and assume the leadership of the Holy Club. The members were totally devoted to piety and living a holy life. To this end, Cameron notes that "its members fasted, prayed regularly, lived sparingly, and gave to the poor both of the time and the substance thus saved. They visited the sick, preached in prisons, and kept a school for poor children."[53]

The Holy Club then was an early successful attempt at combining the complementary features of personal piety and social responsibility. This achievement would reach a climax in the class meeting.

Even at this early date, Wesley was surrounded in controversy. Yet the controversy was inevitable due to the situation in which the Holy Club found itself. This small island of devout men existed in a vast sea of riotous and dissolute living that was characteristic of Oxford during the eighteenth century. "Its strenuous piety was soon notorious among the lax undergraduates, and tempted them to coin what must have seemed clever and devastating nicknames: The Holy Club, The Reforming Club, Bible Moths, Methodists, Supererogation Men, Enthusiasts."[54] Yet Wesley endured even this juvenile name calling and ". . . with characteristic aplomb, he accepted it as a badge of

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[53]Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 33.

[54]Outler, p. 8.

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honor and proceeded to define 'the character of a Methodist' as one who really believes and lives 'the common principles of Christianity.'"[55]

Moravian Influence

On October 14, 1735, the Wesley brothers as well as two other members of the Holy Club embarked as missionaries to Georgia for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. During the time aboard ship, John came into contact with a band of Moravians, the German heirs to Spener.

Upon learning of the Moravians' presence, John undertook to learn German in order to learn more about their humility and simple faith. Writing in the Journal on January 25, 1736, he records an incident at sea that greatly impressed him. In the midst of a storm, he wrote these words:

> There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge. In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, (wherein we were mentioning the power of God,) the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans (looked up, and without intermission) calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, "Was you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."
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> From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbours, (and found myself enabled to speak with them in

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[55]Ibid.

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> boldness and to) point out to them the difference in the hour of trial between him that feareth God and him that feareth Him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen.[56]

Wesley continued to meet with and be impressed by the Moravians during the remainder of the trip to Georgia.

Upon his arrival in Georgia on February 1736, Wesley met with August Gottlieb Spangenberg who had previously arrived with an earlier band of Moravians. Of that first meeting he wrote these words which reveal his state of mind on February 8:

> I asked Mr. Spangenberg's advice with regard to myself--to my own conduct. He told me he could say nothing till he had asked me two or three questions. "Do you know yourself? Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused, and said, "I know He is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know He has saved you?" I answered, "I hope He has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words. (After my answering, he gave me several directions, which may the good God who sent him enable me to follow!)[57]

After this rather inauspicious beginning which seemed to foreshadow the results of Wesley's missionary work, he remained in contact with Spangenberg and the Moravians even until his sudden departure for England on December 22, 1737.

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[56]John Wesley, The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. (London: Epworth Press, 1960), I, 142-143.

[57]Ibid., I, 151.

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Peter Boehler. February 1738, Wesley arrived back in London after his speedy departure from Georgia. Semmel describes the reason for leaving and Wesley's resultant mental state in the following manner:

> There had been a scandal in the colony: Wesley had evidently fallen in love with a young woman, and had then declined to marry her on the advice of the Moravian missionaries; after she had married another, Wesley, for what he regarded as substantial grounds though some suggested he was moved by jealousy, banned her from the communion table, and was consequently sued by her husband for defamation of her character. Wesley thus came back to London somewhat under a cloud and with the mark of failure, both worldly and spiritual. He had not achieved holiness, and had come to the painful conclusion that he himself had never been truly converted.[58]

With these feelings in mind, Wesley, four days after his arrival in London, encountered Peter Boehler, a Moravian minister ordained by Count Zinzendorf.

Under the tutelage of Boehler, Wesley began to preach salvation by faith even before he himself fully believed in it. At this time, "Wesley and a number of others organized themselves into a religious society meeting in Fetter Lane, linking themselves with the Moravians."[59]

Indeed, it was the religious society and the corresponding Moravian influence of Peter Boehler that led Wesley to his famous Aldersgate experience on the evening of May 24, 1738. Commenting on the value of the religious societies as introduced to Wesley by the Moravians, Baker

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[58]Semmel, p. 30. [59]Ibid., p. 31.

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notes that "on board ship, in Georgia, and now in England, Wesley's contacts with the Moravians had underlined the value of religious society and of Religious Societies. They had shown the Wesleys the way from formal into vital religion."[60]

Count Zinzendorf. Shortly after his Aldersgate experience, in the summer of 1738, Wesley left for Herrnhut which was a model Moravian community established by Zinzendorf on the continent. The purpose of the trip was ". . . an attempt to test, at the source, the reality and power of the piety he had encountered in Spangenberg and Peter Boehler."[61] Wesley's impressions of the Moravians at Herrnhut were mixed. He met many persons whose faith greatly impressed him. "On the other hand, he was also quick to spot the signs of self-righteousness among them, and to be repelled by the cult of personality which had grown up around their leader, Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf."[62] He was additionally repelled by what he observed to be monasticism for "his mission was not to be a monastic one, but one in and of the world, the rather bustling world of an increasingly commercial and industrial England."[63]

The expedition to Herrnhut was not a total loss, however, for Wesley was greatly impressed about ". . . the system of bands and societies into which the believers were

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[60]Baker, I, 218.

[61]Outler, p. 14.

[62]Ibid., p. 15.

[63]Semmel, pp. 32-33.

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organized as a means of watching over each other's morals, as well as making for their more orderly supervision by the leaders of the Church. . . ."[64] Wesley took this pattern of bands back to England and began to utilize them in the societies in which he had influence. Baker notes that "as early as March 1739 he and Boehler had established a band for Oxford students, and another for town women."[65]

Wesley realized the value of the Moravian bands for his movement even though they had been originally designed to be utilized within a monastic community. What was needed was a system for the spiritual oversight of those recently converted. "Preaching alone might produce 'conversions,' but those souls would 'backslide' and be lost unless the newly saved could be systematically brought together to exhort and to encourage each other, and to guard each other against the sinfulness of the world."[66] These bands so utilized became an integral part of the Methodist movement until they were displaced by the class meeting. As such they were a definite predecessor to the class meeting.

The Moravians made a definite impact upon Wesley and contributed positively to the fledgling revival. The movement is primarily indebted to the Moravians for the system of bands that Wesley observed at Herrnhut and which he instituted into the societies under his influence.

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[64]Ibid., p. 33. [65]Baker, I, 219-220.

[66]Semmel, p. 33.

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Break with the Moravians

Wesley's involvement with the Moravians was short-lived. A theological controversy soon developed and lingered for a year over the issue of the degrees of faith and the usage of the means of grace. While Wesley was impressed with many features of the Moravians and in particular their organizational structure, he disagreed on one doctrine in particular. Norwood notes that "especially did he reject that form known as 'quietism,' which insisted that to seek faith or use the means of faith before faith was granted was worse than useless."[67]

The theological controversy took place in the Fetter Lane Society that had been jointly initiated by Wesley and Boehler. The difficulty began when in October of 1739, James Hutton introduced to the Society a young Moravian named Philip Molther. Molther had been recently ordained by Zinzendorf and was on his way to Pennsylvania. Cameron notes that "his mind was filled with mystical, quietistic notions, which he advocated vigorously."[68] During the following year after Molther's arrival, Wesley devoted himself to attempting to undo the damage that quietism was doing to the Fetter Lane Society. Wesley records the result of

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[67]Frederick A. Norwood, The Story of American Methodism (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 37.

[68]Cameron, The Rise of Methodism, p. 256.

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Molther's teaching. He writes:

> I left Bristol, and on Saturday came to London. The first person I met with there was one (Mrs. Turner) whom I had left strong in faith and zealous of good works; but she now told me Mr. Molther had fully convinced her she never had any faith at all; and had advised her, till she received faith, to be "still," ceasing from outward works; which she had accordingly done, and did not doubt but in a short time she should find the advantage of it.[69]

The controversy in the Society continued, but in the summer of 1740, Wesley capitulated and withdrew from the Society with the remnant that was faithful to him. This remnant united with the Foundery Society which had been started by Wesley the previous year. The union of the Fetter Lane dissidents and the Foundery Society on July 23, 1740 created the United Society in London. However, Wesley did not use the term "United Society" until April 7, 1741.[70]

First Methodist Societies

The first United Society came into being at Bristol on July 11, 1739. However, for reasons known only to Wesley, he chose to ignore the society at Bristol and instead considered the Foundery Society to be the first Methodist Society. Perhaps the reason is that by the time Wesley wrote the historical introduction to the "Rules of the United Societies" in 1743, the Foundery Society was

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[69]Wesley, The Journal, II, 312.

[70]Ibid., II, 442.

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the most important one in Methodism. It is also possible, as Cameron speculates, that since "the Foundery Society was from the beginning under Wesley's personal control . . ."[71] it would also be foremost in Wesley's thoughts. An additional fact needs to be mentioned that the group which met at the Foundery voluntarily accepted Wesley as their spiritual guide and met in a building owned by him. The members could leave if they were dissatisfied but as long as they remained they were under Wesley's rule.

In the "Rules of the United Societies," Wesley gives a brief history of the Methodist societies as well as his own definition of the meaning and purpose of a society. Albert Outler cites this history for us:

> 1. In the latter end of the year 1739, eight or ten persons came to me in London, who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that I would spend some time with them in prayer and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads. That we might have more time for this great work, I appointed a day when they might all come together, which from thence forward they did every week, namely, on Thursday in the evening. To these, and as many more as desired to join with them (for their number increased daily) I gave advices from time to time which I judged most needful for them; and we always concluded our meeting with prayer suited to their several necessities.
>
> 2. This was the rise of the United Society, first at London and then in other places. Such a society is no other than "a company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and

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[71]Cameron, The Rise of Methodism, p. 258.

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> to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation."[72]

At the outset, the early societies were small, intimate groups much like the later class meeting. Baker commenting on the development of the societies notes that "these Societies were brought into being, not according to any predetermined plan, but as expedients forced upon a man ready to utilize almost any methods to accomplish what he regarded as a divine mission."[73]

As time passed, the United Societies were further subdivided into bands, classes, select societies, and Penitents. These later developments will be dealt with later as we consider the organization of the revival.

Development of the Class Meeting

Baker notes that in 1741 "only the band members were really under any close supervision in small groups; the other members of the United Society would simply meet in a larger fellowship once a week."[74] It was in this organizational setting that the class meeting arose and became the foundational instrument of the revival giving supervision to the society members and providing a framework for the individual's quest for Christian perfection.

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[72]Outler, pp. 177-178.

[73]Baker, I, 213.

[74]Ibid., I, 222.

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The class meeting had a rather ignominious origin on Monday, February 15, 1742. On that day, John Wesley met with the United Society in Bristol in order to resolve a financial obligation concerning the room in which the Society met. The record indicates that Wesley had personally borrowed the money to erect the structure which housed the Society. Unfortunately, the Society had been unable to pay off the debt and ". . . the loan might be called in at any time, and several hints of such a calamity had been given."[75]

The Society at Bristol included several sea captains, one of whom was a Captain Foy. The exact identity of Captain Foy has not been decisively determined to this day, however, his existence is not in question. The captain suggested that each member of the Society give a penny a week toward alleviating the debt. Some objected that not all were able to give a penny as they were poor. To this the captain replied, "True; then put ten or twelve of them to me. Let each give what they can weekly, and I will supply what is wanting."[76]

This plan was accepted and the whole Society was divided into classes. Leaders were appointed by Wesley to collect the contributions from each class and bring them

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[75]Simon, John Wesley and the Methodist Societies, p. 63.

[76]Ibid.

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to the stewards weekly. To each leader a class of about twelve was assigned.

The arrangement is not famous as a financial proposal but rather for an entire unsuspected consequence. Baker tells us that there was no "pastoral function at first envisaged, until two of the collectors or 'leaders' reported to Wesley that they had found one member quarreling with his wife, and another drunk, whereupon Wesley thought, 'This is the very thing we wanted'. . . ."[77] This development helped Wesley with his pastoral difficulties and he gave the class leaders the additional responsibility of watching over the lives of the members.

A few months later, another important transformation took place. "Instead of the class leaders visiting all their members each week, the members themselves came together for a fellowship meeting, either in the Society's headquarters, the leader's home, or some other suitable place."[78] It needs to be noted, for clarification, that "the title 'class' implied no teaching element, but was simply the English form of the Latin classis or division."[79]

On March 25, 1742, Wesley presented the Bristol scheme to the London Society and it was adopted there. Wesley reports that "this was the origin of our classes in London, for which I can never sufficiently thank God, the

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[77]Baker, I, 222. [78]Ibid., I, 223.

[79]Ibid., I, 222.

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unspeakable usefulness of the institution having ever since been more and more manifest."[80] What had originally begun as a system for collecting money had developed into a means for maintaining a watch on the lives of all of the Society's members. Before long, the class meeting system was established in all of the Societies and was an integral part of the Methodism that came to America.

ORGANIZATION

If we turn to the Minutes of the 1744 Conference, we will find the manner in which the Societies were subdivided. It is important to note, however, that the smaller Societies were not as extensively divided and most probably were only subdivided into classes. The Minutes reveal the following divisions:

> Q.1. How are the people divided who desire to be under your care?
> A. Into the United Societies, the Bands, the Select Societies, and the Penitents.
> Q.2. How do these differ from each other?
> A. The United Societies (which are the largest of all) consist of awakened persons. Part of these, who are supposed to have remission of sins, are more closely united in the Bands. Those in the Bands, who seem to walk in the light of God, compose the Select Societies. Those of them who have made shipwreck of the faith, meet apart as Penitents.[81]

The obvious lack of reference to the class meeting is most conspicuous in this fourfold division of the Society as set forth in 1744. It is especially unusual

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[80]Wesley, The Journal, II, 535.

[81]Baker, I, 224.

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since the Conference met two years after the birthday of the class meeting whose development was applauded by Wesley as being essential to the work of the revival.

Some scholars suggest that the reason for the omission of the class meeting is that Wesley equated the class meeting with the band in his own mind. As an example of this possible equation of terms, let us turn to Wesley's letter to Mrs. Bennis. He writes:

> You are not sent to Waterford to be useless. Stir up the gift of God which is in you; gather together those that have been scattered abroad, and make up a band, if not a class or two.[82]

While it is possible that the two terms were considered to be the same by Wesley, we must be careful to differentiate between the two as Wesley did in his later writings. As we shall see later, the band differed in composition from the class, however the agenda and purpose for both groups was the same. Baker writes of Wesley's attitude toward the band in those Societies where both were employed. He writes:

> Once meetings were established for all members there was a strong tendency for the classes to oust the bands from their key position in the Methodist economy. Indeed in his Plain Account of the People Called Methodists (1748) Wesley himself not only gave first place to the classes, but implied that the bands had developed from them. To the end of his life, however, he continued to insist that without bands a society would lack spiritual vigour, and most of the larger societies did indeed retain them.[83]

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[82]John Wesley, The Letters (London: Epworth Press, 1931), VI, 68.

[83]Baker, I, 223.

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Despite Wesley's account that the classes preceded the bands, we have noted earlier that the bands were copied from the Moravian bands at Herrnhut and did in fact precede the classes. What is important, however, is the fact that Wesley did in fact maintain both class and band in the Societies and especially in the larger Societies as in London and Bristol. A further bit of evidence for the mutual existence of both class and band is also cited by Baker. He notes that in the larger Societies where there were classes and bands that "a member might be downgraded from meeting both in class and band to meeting in class only. . . ."[84] The indication here is that a Society member could not only hold a class membership but membership in a band as well. This bit of information is further evidence for the mutual existence of class and band as well as being a possible reason why Wesley might have confused the two in 1744.

United Societies

The first United Society came into existence at Bristol on July 11, 1739. A little over a year later on July 23, 1740 the Foundery Society in London became a United Society as a result of the union of its original members and the Fetter Lane dissidents. The distinguishing mark of these first United Societies and the later ones

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[84]Ibid., I, 224.

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was that they met in property and buildings personally owned by John Wesley. It is because of this fact that Wesley was the undisputed head of the United Societies.

As we indicated above, each United Society was further divided into classes, bands, select societies or bands, and penitents. Let us now turn to the individual consideration of each of these components.

Class meeting. The class meeting was the basic unit of membership in the United Societies. As noted above, there is considerable confusion between class and band, however, for the purposes of this paper we will consider the two to be virtually identical. There is one exception which will be noted in the discussion concerning the band. The class meeting then was just a further historical development of the original bands. In fact, it would seem that the class meeting shared in the rules and procedures of the band, since Wesley did not publish a separate set of rules for the classes.

Bands. The band was the original division which one would encounter within the United Societies. As it has been noted, the bands and the class meetings coexisted within the United Societies. The single apparent difference between band and class was based upon Wesley's experience at Herrnhut. The bands were segregated from one another on the basis of sex while no such differentiation was made in the classes. The classes were fully integrated in regard to the sex of the members.

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The band member joined in a common quest for Christian perfection and to this end ". . . was expected to lay bare all his thoughts and deeds to the members of his band, who would listen, admonish, and reprove, fulfilling the role of a surrogate family for the 'alienated' poor."[85] This same pattern was also carried on in the class meeting.

Select society. A further division within the United Society was in the form of the Select Society. The membership of the Select Societies was drawn from among the bands. Leslie Church notes an interesting delineation of spiritual development from membership in the United Society to the Select Society. He writes:

> By 1744, it is evident that the United Societies consisted of "awakened persons", whilst the "Bands" were formed of those who claimed to have received "remission of sins". The Select Societies were made up of Band members "who seemed to walk in the light of God". . . .[86]

As time passed, the Select Society fell into disuse and eventually disappeared from the scene.

Penitents. The final division within the United Society was in the form of a group known as the Penitents. Frank Baker reports that "the Penitents were not backsliding class-members, but band members who had fallen

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[85]Semmel, p. 114-114.

[86]Leslie F. Church, The Early Methodist People (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), pp. 150-151.

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away spiritually."[87] Another writer has described this group as those who had made ". . . 'shipwreck of faith', but were still allowed to remain in a kind of probationary fellowship."[88] The Penitents too went the way of the Select Society and became merely an historical footnote to the Revival.

Membership Requirements

Membership within the class and band was regulated by a series of rules by which every member was expected to live and which also regulated the agenda of the class or band meeting. Baker especially notes that in the Rules of the Band-Societies which Wesley formulated in December of 1738, there were five questions that were to be asked of everyone at every meeting:

1. What known Sin have you committed since our last Meeting?
2. What Temptations have you met with?
3. How was [sic] you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said or done, of which you doubt whether it be a Sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?[89]

It seems obvious that nothing was missed in the individual's life as a result of this type of questionning.

Membership was further regulated through the usage of a ticket system. Admission to class or band was only possible if one held a current ticket for the quarter in

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[87]Baker, I, 225. [88]Church, p. 151.

[89]Baker, I, 219.

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question. This ticket entitled the bearer to attend the congregational meetings of the Society, Covenant Services, and Love Feasts. The ticket was a highly valued document and "some members treasured their tickets as signs of unbroken precious fellowship until the close of life; and dying asked that they might be interred with them."[90]

The distribution of tickets to the members was tightly controlled by Wesley. Baker reports that the following system was used for the distribution:

> Four times a year membership was renewed at the distribution of the tickets introduced by Wesley in 1741. This was done after a 'visitation', which originally meant quite literally a series of house-to-house visits, but later an official gathering. On these occasions Wesley or one of his deputies would meet one or more classes assembled together, would make inquiries about each individual, and would then present him with his new ticket.[91]

During the "visitation" Wesley would also examine the class records that were maintained by the class leader. These files were a record of each member's behavior, attendance, and financial contributions. The class records, in addition, to the oral inquiries, served to further determine an individual's fitness for a ticket for the next quarter.

Leadership

The leadership within the Revival was multileveled but always with Wesley in complete command. Wesley felt

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[90]W. J. Townsend, A New History of Methodism (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), p. 288.

[91]Baker, I, 223.

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that there was a certain element of safety in having this form of leadership. He writes:

> But it is common for the assistant in any place when several leaders are met together, to ask their advice, as to anything that concerns either the temporal or spiritual welfare of the society. This he may or he may not do, as he sees best. I frequently do it in the larger societies; and on many occasions I have found that in a multitude of counsellors there is safety.[92]

Wesley. As was previously indicated, Wesley was the supreme commander of the Methodist Revival and of the United Societies. Semmel reports that "Wesley himself had ruled, apparently, by divine right, without benefit of the constitutional limitations which he regarded as useful restraints on King George."[93] At the 1766 annual Conference, he described his power over the Methodists as being the "'. . . power of admitting into and excluding from the Societies under my care,' of 'choosing and removing' stewards and Helpers, of 'appointing them when, where, and how to help me.'"[94]

In 1741, at Kingswood, Wesley expelled some members of the band for ridiculing his preaching and that of his brother, Charles. He read the following statement which is the earliest recorded instance of disciplinary action:

> I, John Wesley, by the consent and approbation of the band-society in Kingswood, do declare the persons above-mentioned to be no longer members thereof.

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[92]Wesley, The Journal, V, 405.

[93]Semmel, p. 115.

[94]Ibid., pp. 115-116.

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> Neither will they be so accounted, until they shall openly confess their fault, and thereby do what in them lies to remove the scandal they have given.[95]

Assistant. The assistant or travelling preacher is next on the hierarchy of authority. These individuals were a great boon to Wesley for "with the appointment of itinerant preachers to act as his 'assistants' or 'helpers' he felt able to delegate to them the responsibility for oversight of members and leaders alike."[96] We have previously noted the role of the assistant in the distribution of tickets and thus ". . . they could not help being pastors also in such intimate associations as bands and classes."[97] However their pastoral care was sporadic at best since they were constantly on the road travelling from town to town and class to class.

Class leader. The class leaders were the real pastors to the class members albeit an informal arrangement. The leader was charged with the spiritual well-being of the ten or twelve persons assigned to him. In addition to conducting the weekly meetings, the leader maintained a record book which was shown to the visiting preacher quarterly. "Usually such a record included at

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[95]Wesley, The Journal, II, 430-431.

[96]Baker, I, 225.

[97]Norwood, p. 34.

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least the individual's name, residence, occupation, attendance record, and weekly contribution."[98]

Wesley listed the leader's duties as follows:

> It is his business (1) to see each person in his class once a week; to inquire how their souls prosper; to advise, reprove, comfort, or exhort them; (2) to receive what they are willing to give toward the expenses of the society; and (3) to meet the assistant and the stewards once a week.[99]

Wesley insisted that the position of class leader was the lowest in the Methodist hierarchy being just one step above the society members. In April 1771, he attributed the weakness in the Dublin society as being the direct result of the leaders' domination of the society. He writes:

> Considering these things, can we wonder at the confusion which has been here for some years?
>
> If one wheel of a machine gets out of its place what disorder must ensue!
>
> In the Methodist discipline the wheels regularly stand thus: the assistant, the preachers, the stewards, the leaders, the people.
>
> But here the leaders, who are the lowest wheel but one, were got quite out of their place. They were got at the top of all, above the stewards, the preachers, yea, and above the assistant himself.
>
> To this, chiefly, I impute the gradual decay of the work of God in Dublin.[100]

Despite the limitations placed upon the leaders, the leader had the authority to select time and place of meeting and to conduct the meeting according to the needs of his class members.

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[98]Orlando, Chapman, "The Origin, Growth, and Contemporary Relevance of the Methodist Class Meeting" (unpublished Th.M. thesis, School of Theology at Claremont, 1963), p. 41.

[99]Wesley, The Journal, V, 404-405.

[100]Ibid., pp. 405-406.

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Stewards. The stewards were the chief administrative officers of the societies and ". . . Wesley was borrowing the term already current in the old Religious Societies."[101] The number of stewards varied, however, each society had at least one person holding that office and the larger societies had two such persons.

In the summer of 1744 at the first Conference, Wesley set forth the duties of the steward. They were:

> 1. To manage the temporal things of the Society. 2. To receive the weekly contributions of the Leaders of the Classes. 3. To expend what is needful from time to time. 4. To send relief to the poor. 5. To see that the public buildings be kept clean and in good repair. 6. To keep an exact account of Receipts and Expenses. 7. To inform the Helpers, if the rules of the house, of the school, of the Bands, or of the Society, be not punctually observed: and 8. If need be, to inform the Minister hereof. 9. To tell the Helpers in love, if they think anything amiss in their doctrine or life. 10. If it be not removed, to send timely notice to the Minister. 11. To meet his fellow Steward weekly, in order to consult together on the preceding heads.[102]

As time passed, the stewards ". . . became of such importance that on occasion they were invited to share the Conference deliberation with Wesley and his preachers."[103]

CLASS FUNCTIONS

The members of the individual classes gathered on a weekly basis for the express purpose of supervising the

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[101] Baker, I, 227.

[102] Cameron, The Rise of Methodism, p. 358.

[103] Baker, I, 227.

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spiritual affairs of its members. It is important to note as Simon does ". . . that the 'sole design' of the Societies was 'to promote real holiness of heart and life,' and it is clear that the pursuit of holiness was conducted with the intelligent enthusiasm of practical men, who were ready to adopt methods which had been proven effective by experience."[104]

What were the methods that were employed in the class meeting? Unfortunately, there are very few eye-witness accounts. John Simon, however, cites the account of a young man who was a class leader in New Market. His account of the duties of a class leader shed some light on the internal activities of the class. The young man says:

> My business was: 1. To see each person in my class once a week; and, if any were absent, to inquire into the cuase. 2. Whenever we met together to sing psalms or hymns and to pray with them. 3. To examine how their souls prospered, and what progress they had made the preceding week in "the way of the Lord." Whether they were unanimously determined to serve God with their whole heart? If any had fallen into sin, they were reproved; if tempted, they were comforted and encouraged; and those who ran well, adorning their profession in all things, were exhorted still to press forward, and give glory to God.
>
> After a faithful and friendly examination of each other (between which and the Popish auricular confession, with which some have erroneously or unkindly paralleled it, there is scarcely the most distant resemblance), they concluded with praising God, and prayers suited to their several conditions.[105]

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[104]Simon, John Wesley and the Methodist Societies, pp. 14-15.

[105]John Simon, John Wesley and the Advance of Methodism (London: Epworth Press, 1925), p. 176.

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As it is readily apparent, the basic form of the class meeting described above was fully consistent with the stated purpose of the United Societies which was "to flee from the wrath to come. . . ." To this end, the members of the class gathered each week in order to work out their salvation according to the injunctions of Jesus as they understood them. One individual describing the effect that the class meeting had upon him wrote:

> One Saturday night I came to class, and resolved not to depart until mine eyes had seen this great salvation. After I had entered the room, my heart seemed as hard as a stone; but I was not discouraged. All my prayer was, "Lord, create in me a clean heart, and renew in me a right spirit." The might power of God descended upon me; my heart was emptied of every evil, and Jesus took up all the room.[106]

For many individuals, this emphasis upon a personal religious experience was the main reason for the existence of the class meeting. However, the class meeting had another impact upon its members as they began to take seriously the Biblical injunctions concerning the Christian lifestyle.

IMPACT OF THE CLASS MEETING

The class meeting as it existed within the eighteenth century Methodist Revival had an impact not only upon its members but upon British society and the Anglican Church as well. Additionally, as we shall see, its impact

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[106]Thomas Jackson, Lives of Early Methodist Preachers abridged by Mrs. Frank Stevens (London: Marshall, 1903), p. 89, cited by Chapman, p. 69.

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had a surprising outcome as it trained individuals for leadership. These individuals later became involved in the British trade union movement which had a decided impact on British society.

Relations With the Anglican Church

The relationship between the United Societies and the Church of England was complex. Wesley insisted that his societies were ". . . contributory to the welfare of the church rather than a competitor with it."[107] Like the earlier religious societies of the seventeenth century, the Methodist societies were careful to place themselves within the rubric of the Anglican parish system. The societies were careful not to hold meetings during the hours of parish church services. Wesley ". . . was adamant in his determination to keep them from becoming churches themselves. To this end, he insisted all his life that his Methodists take the sacraments regularly in their parish churches."[108]

However, despite all of Wesley's precautions, "in one way or another the Methodists exercised all the functions of a church save the sacramental one."[109] As time passed, the Methodists looked not to the Anglican church but to the society and class meeting as the source of their spiritual nourishment.

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[107]Cameron, Methodism and Society . . ., p. 36.

[108]Ibid., pp. 36-37. [109]Ibid., p. 37.

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The Methodist movement remained just that and not a church separate from the Anglican Church until the time of Wesley's death. There were, however, cracks appearing in the fabric of the church which were caused by some of Wesley's administrative decisions. One of the first signs of schism occurred in the 1780's when Wesley ". . . reluctantly allowed a few of the societies to hold meetings at the hours of church services."[110] This action had the net effect that members of some of the societies no longer attended the parish services but instead were only able to attend the society meetings.

The major point of difference, however, occurred in 1784 when Wesley proceeded to ordain Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey for the work in America. Wesley was deeply concerned about the provision of the sacraments for the American Methodists. His dilemma was further compounded by his inbred opposition to lay administration of the sacraments. He resolved the problem by ordaining preachers. Norwood reports for us the interesting chain of reasoning by which Wesley arrived at his decision to ordain:

> Hence, he now acted in accordance with his understanding of his position as an ordained minister of the Church of England and as the superintendent of the People Called Methodists. This position, in his view, coincided with the position of the bishops of the primitive church as he found it in the New Testament and the writings of the early Fathers. A bishop, he concluded, was a presbyter who exercised authority over a diocese or segment of the church. More particularly, he saw himself as comparable to the itinerant bishop,

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[110] Ibid., p. 36.

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> the chorepiscopos. He was a presbyter in apostolic succession. He was also an administrator of a large movement. This made him a "scriptural episcopos," as he put it.[111]

Whether we accept his chain of reasoning or not, the fact still remains that Wesley did ordain clergy which fact ultimately did result in the separation of the Methodists from the Church of England. It was the practice of ordination which led a movement of societies and class meetings to become a church in its own right.

With the ordination of Vasey and Whatcoat, the Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in America at the Christmas Conference of 1784. British Methodism, on the other hand, went through a much slower process of moving from society to church. Most scholars, however, agree that the metamorphosis began upon the death of Wesley in 1791 resulting in no single leader in complete control of the movement.

After Wesley's death, the societies were struggling with the question of whether or not the sacraments should be administered within the society itself. In 1795, a compromise was agreed upon in which each society would decide for itself if the preachers should administer the sacraments.

As the societies moved into the nineteenth century, the Conference began the practice of ordination ". . . first for foreign missionaries, and then for those

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[111]Norwood, p. 96.

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beginning to preach at home; and the preachers began to call and think of themselves as 'ministers.'"[112] There is no set date for the emergence of a new church in England since even as late as 1870 some of the societies still were not administering the sacraments. The death of John Wesley was indeed the turning point, but as Cameron so aptly points out ". . . the emergence of Methodism as a dissenting church was not a matter of institutional schism, but of a gradual accretion of churchly functions to the Methodist societies."[113]

Impact Upon British Society

The class meeting had a definite effect upon British society, however, it is quite impossible to point to a direct relationship between the good works performed by class members and the instruction that they received in class. There were no specific instructions from Wesley as to the social responsibilities of the class members. From the beginning, the primary function of the class meeting was fellowship with other Christians to the end that they would incorporate in their lives the Biblical injunctions for living. Wesley writing about this aspect of the class meeting, shared these thoughts:

> Many now happily experienced that Christian fellowship of which they had not so much as an idea before. They

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[112]Cameron, Methodism and Society. . ., p. 72.

[113]Ibid.

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> began to "bear one another's burdens," and naturally to "care for each other." As they had daily a more intimate acquaintance with, so they had a more endeared affection for, each other. And "speaking the truth in love, they grew up into Him in all things, who is the Head, even Christ; from whom the whole body, fitly joined together, and compacted by that which every joint supplied . . . increased unto edifying itself in love."[114]

Because the class meeting was designed for spiritual nourishment, it seems more appropriate to join with Gloster S. Udy in describing the impact of the class upon society as being along the lines of a "field of force." The values taught and learned in the class meeting had an indirect effect upon eighteenth century British society. Udy writes:

> By participating in the creative experiences of the small family patterned fellowship, individuals had their attitudes and ideas modified, clarified and scrutinized, by the constant process of orienting themselves and their friends around fundamental Christian principles.
>
> The result of the socializing process is seen in the growth of a social Christian conscience, which became a vivid check to individual members, regardless of the situations in which they found themselves.[115]

The social conscience that developed manifested itself primarily in the form of philanthropy by the members of the classes. This philanthropy manifested itself in four forms: (1) the sick; (2) the prisoner; (3) the poor; and (4) the illiterate. Simon notes that it was a concern for the love of humanity that motivated the movement in its concern for the poor and the other unfortunates of British society. He writes:

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[114]Wesley, The Letters, II, 297-298.

[115]Gloster S. Udy, Key to Change (Enfield: Pettrigrew Pty., 1962), p. 53.

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> Out of the "public stock" they relieved the individual necessities of the poor of the parish and put their children to school. They visited the poor at their homes, maintained orphan children, fixed some poor persons in a way of trade, set sundry prisoners for debt at liberty, assisted poor scholars at the University, and were greatly instrumental in establishing nearly one hundred charity schools in London, as well as others in the country.[116]

It was this concern for their fellow human beings that proved to be the mark of the Revival that made it different from all other such religious phenomena. Eric North indicated this insight when he wrote:

> It was just this emphasis on the actual service of one's fellowmen that saved the Revival from being self-centered and unsocial. It was not enough for the Methodists that a man should have the experience of the new birth and an assurance of salvation from his sins. If he were to be true to the genius of the movement, he must inevitably gain from this experience the firm conviction that his first duty was to carry to the unfortunate and the oppressed the message of new hope and the ministry of sympathetic aid.[117]

The Methodist Revival which manifested itself in such structural forms as the class meeting was not only a vehicle for personal piety but also of social concern. The Revival clearly combined these two widely divergent contemporary expressions of religious life under a single religious experience.

Leader Training

Perhaps the single most unexpected result of the

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[116]Simon, John Wesley and the Religious Societies, p. 20.

[117]Eric M. North, Early Methodist Philanthropy (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1914), p. 113.

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class meeting was the fact of leader training. The class provided a unique setting for training the unfortunate of British society that joined the movement to lead others. It was in the class that members of the working classes gained the practical experience of how proper leadership could alleviate and help their fellow human beings. The poor joined a class and gained practical experience in leadership as they assumed the various roles of class leader and steward in the local society. Wearmouth notes that "the exercise of these various functions by laymen in the Methodist constitution entrusted to them a great deal of power and responsibility."[118]

After Wesley's death, and as the class meeting moved into the nineteenth century, it took a surprising turn. The experience that the members of the working class gained in the class meeting carried over into the trade union movement and into the political associations such as the Chartists. As for the labor unions, Wearmouth alludes to the fact that "the first public avowal of Methodist influence was made in 1831, when the National Union of Working Classes adopted the class system."[119]

No less were the classes copied by the political societies of the nineteenth century. As Wearmouth shows:

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[118]Robert F. Wearmouth, Methodism and the Working Class Movements of England 1800-1850 (London: Epworth Press, 1947), p. 24.

[119]Ibid., p. 217.

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> When the political classes were introduced among the Chartists of Sheffield, a placard on the walls announcing the fact said they were "similar to the Methodist Class Meetings", while the Sheffield Independent (Aug. 24, 1839) designated them as an "imitation of the class meetings of the Methodists". The Sheffield Mercury (Aug. 24, 1839) calls them a "practical parody of private religious assemblies, which have so long been known among our Wesleyan friends."[120]

It is no surprise that the class meeting had such a pervasive influence upon British society since at least one in five class members gained leadership experience in the classes.

It was in the classes that the individual encountered a new outlook on life. "As Methodism invariably created in the human mind a threefold sense of dignity, vocation, and responsibility, it was easy for those who came under its influence to rebel against political and social injustice."[121] Thus, Methodism produced some of the great social reformers of the 1800's by way of the class meeting. Wearmouth summed up the Methodist training and influence so well when he said: "It was 'in the chapel-life working men first learnt to speak and organize, to persuade and trust their fellows. It was in the Little Bethel that many of the working-class leaders were trained'."[122]

DEMISE OF THE CLASS MEETING

The class meeting went into a period of gradual decline after the death of Wesley and eventually faded

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[120]Ibid. [121]Ibid., p. 216. [122]Ibid.

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from the scene in the nineteenth century. The British experience is similar to the one in America, for as the movement ceased to be a movement and became an established church the class meeting was no longer necessary.

In America, the function of the class was to maintain a fledgling church during the long absences necessitated by the absence of the itinerant preacher as he travelled from place to place. In Britain, the function of the class was similar in that the preachers were itinerant there as well. However, there the class was the means of revival within an established church with no intention of creating a new church. In America, the intention from the outset was to create a church.

Having noted this one fundamental difference in function of the class meeting between Britain and America, it must be noted that their ultimate decline was due to the same phenomenon. Norwood notes this phenomenon in relation to the American church in the 1800's when he writes:

> Around the middle of the century the class meeting went into decline. Evidence of this is clear in official records and personal recollection. Those who had been nurtured in faith via class meeting felt a deep loss at the decline of interest. For several decades articles and pamphlets appeared regularly either bewailing the loss or seeking for a remedy. The revision of the Discipline made in 1872 resulted in this new statement: "The primary object of distributing the members of the Church into classes is to secure the sub-pastoral oversight made necessary by out itinerant economy" (Par. 76).[123]

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[123]Norwood, pp. 131-132.

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The demise of the class meeting then is tied to the end of the itinerant ministry. As long as the travelling preacher was constantly on the move, the class meeting was secure as the place where the individual could recieve pastoral oversight from the class leader. However, once the travelling preacher had settled down in one location, there really was no further need for the class leader and the class meeting. The preacher could now assume all of those pastoral responsibilities formerly assumed by the class and its leader. Norwood noted an unexpected by-product of this settling down procedure when he wrote: "Inadvertently, because of the settling down of the traveling preacher, Methodism lost one of its strongest supports, the active ministerial participation of the lay people."[124] This lamentable consequence is one that the church has been attempting to rectify ever since that time.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

No accounting of the history of the class meeting would be complete without some discussion of its strengths and weaknesses. This fact is of especial importance considering the ultimate aim of this project in evaluating the class meeting in terms of its usefulness to the contemporary American church.

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[124]Ibid., p. 132.

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Strengths

We have already noted in the course of this chapter several of the strengths that were evidenced in the British class meeting of the eighteenth century. Certainly one of the most obvious of the strengths is the participation of the laity in all areas of ministry. Except for the sacramental distinction, the laity shared in all the leadership roles of the church. They preached, taught, led prayer meetings, led classes, visited the sick, recruited new members, and cared for prisoners. In sum, the laity performed all of the functions that are in large reserved for the clergy today. It was a true priesthood of all believers.

Tied to this first strength is leader training. As the society member participated in class and band, s/he received valuable experience in leadership and in relating to others. As we noted earlier, this experience spilled over into the labor union movement and into the political groups of British society in the 1800's.

A third value to the class meeting was the apparent successful blending of social witness and personal piety. Perhaps the church today needs to take note of this development. In the class, the members were concerned with their own spiritual progress, but this concern soon manifested itself in concern for others as the class member sought to work out the norm of love of God and love for fellow human beings. Of course, we can see a problem with this

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strength as well which will be noted in the discussion of weaknesses.

Certainly one of the major strengths of the class meeting was the intimate caring and supporting community that the class created within the institutional church. Through the visitation of members and the concern for the members that was demonstrated in the weekly class meeting, a climate of sharing, caring, and supporting was created. It is important to note that this type of atmosphere was foreign to the experience in the Church of England and was a refreshing change.

An additional strength of the class meeting was that it became a means for renewal of the church by nurturing a deeper religious life. Through the prayer, sharing, and fellowship that characterized the class meeting, the concept of ecclesiolae in ecclesia within the Church of England became a reality.

Weaknesses

There were, as well, several weaknesses inherent in the structure of the class meeting that need to be discussed. The first weakness was in the area of the main purpose of the class meeting. As noted earlier, the original purpose of the class was "to flee from the wrath to come . . . ." To achieve such an end result, the class member was concerned with her/his own personal salvation. Thus, all of the actions of the classes, whether they be

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visitation of the sick and of the prisoner or the philanthropic work of the society, are colored with the motive of personal benefit. No good work was performed for the intrinsic goodness of the deed but rather for some personal external reward. Perhaps the charge of Arminianism raised by Wesley's critics is not altogether undeserved.

The second weakness is related to the first and deals with the apparent blending of social witness and personal piety seemingly achieved in the class meeting. If the motivation to do good is all based on self-interests, then there is no real blending of the two areas. The social witness of the classes and their members was in reality an indirect result of the quest for personal salvation.

A third weakness of the class meeting is a limited understanding of social witness. The class members understood social witness to include only social welfare activities and not institutional reform in any major sense. The activity of individual members in the labor union movement, for example, was vastly different from the emphasis that the society as a whole had in terms of charity toward the poor. The former arose out of efforts on the behalf of individuals, while the latter was a major emphasis of the society.

The final weakness may not be so much of a weakness as it is a possible end result of the class meeting. As the class related to the institutional church, the Church

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of England, it became increasingly difficult to contain what was essentially a revival within the church. The society members became increasingly dependent upon the society for more and more of the churchly functions. During Wesley's lifetime, the Revival was contained within the church, however, after his death, the societies became a separate church. Depending upon one's frame of reference, the possibility of schism is either a strength or a weakness, but it certainly is a possible outcome of the revival process as found in the class meeting.

CONCLUSION

We have seen the growth and development of the class meeting in this chapter as well as its impact upon church and society. With its strengths and despite its weaknesses, the class meeting was a definite asset to the church that has long since passed from the scene of ecclesiastical life. Since the passage of the class, the church has been weaker for it and constantly on the lookout for a new source of vigor.

As we move on to consider the question of the relevance of the class meeting to the contemporary church, we might do well to consider and ponder the thoughts of Frederick Norwood on the church since the passage of the class meeting. "Ever since, Methodists have been trying

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to decide whether they would be a great church or a holy people."[125]

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[125]Norwood, p. 132.

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Chapter 3

SPIRITUAL GROWTH GROUPS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

Ever since the demise of the Methodist class meeting and of the conventicles in other religious groups, the church has been attempting to recapture that sense of being a holy people. The quest has taken the contemporary church in many different directions. The church has moved in the direction of liturgical reform and of new styles of Christian education in the attempt to recapture the vitality of being a holy people. Yet no attempt has been more successful than that of the spiritual growth group.

The growth group has been the distinctive medium by which the church has created anew within itself the unique dynamism which comes from being the people of God. It is the growth group in its myriad forms that is present within the contemporary church that will be the vehicle for the same type of renewal that class meetings made possible within the church in Wesley's time. It is the growth group that successfully reunites the seemingly divergent concerns of personal piety and social witness as they were united within the early Methodist class meeting of the eighteenth century. As Harvey and Lois Seifert indicate, the group experience is successful when "the more intimately we relate to God the more we will

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share God's active concern for our needy brothers and sisters."[1]

This is the spiritual growth group as it exists within the contemporary church. It is to this image of the group experience that we will now turn for closer scrutiny.

BASIS FOR CONTEMPORARY INTEREST

The growth group did not just come into renewed existence spontaneously. Rather, the source of new interest in group experiences is embodied in the very characteristics of modern American society. Carl Rogers in his book dealing with encounter groups describes some of the reasons that individuals are led to seek an encounter or growth group experience. He writes:

> I believe it is a hunger for something the person does not find in his work environment, in his church, certainly not in his school or college, and sadly enough not even in modern family life. It is a hunger for relationships which are close and real; in which feelings and emotions can be spontaneously expressed without first being carefully censored and bottled up; where deep experiences--disappointments and joys--can be shared; where new ways of behaving can be risked and tried out; where, in a word, he approaches the state where all is known and all accepted, and thus further growth becomes possible. This seems to be the overpowering hunger which he hopes to satisfy through his experiences in an encounter group.[2]

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[1]Harvey and Lois Seifert, Liberation of Life (Nashville: Upper Room, 1976), p. 10.

[2]Carl R. Rogers, Carl Rogers On Encounter Groups (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 11-12.

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The individual that becomes a member of a growth group finds that these needs are being met as s/he participates in the group experience.

The need for such an intimate group experience arises out of several factors in modern society. We are living in an increasingly urban society with the accompanying feelings of being on a treadmill of ever increasing speed. There is an additional feeling associated with the impersonal quality that is present in so many of our institutions. Rogers refers to it as ". . . the increasing dehumanization of our culture, where the person does not count--only his IBM card or Social Security number."[3] The public demand for such group experiences is also a result of the fact that ". . . we are sufficiently affluent to pay attention to our psychological wants. As long as I am concerned over next month's rent, I am not very sharply aware of my loneliness."[4]

It was as a result of these factors that the psychologically-oriented growth group came upon the American scene. It is important to also note that small groups of a somewhat similar sort had also lingered on in the church in the form of prayer meetings, fellowship cells, and intentional communities. There were also further developments along this line in terms of religious education theory. Even though groups of this type had continued to exist within the church, the major impetus to a

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[3]Ibid., p. 11. [4]Ibid.

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remarkable recent spread of interest came from psychological resources. Thus, we are confining the discussion to this resource in the conviction that it is from the class meeting and the psychologically-oriented growth group that the modern church can best take its models.

The first such groups were developed by Kurt Lewin prior to 1947 and were known as T-groups (T standing for training). The idea for such a group was conceived when Lewin realized ". . . that training in human relations skills was an important but overlooked type of education in modern society."[5]

Another side of the development toward the growth group as we know it was a direct result of the efforts of Carl Rogers and his associates to develop a program for the training of Veterans Administration counselors immediately after World War II. Rogers reports that the staff felt that cognitive training would not equip the counselors to deal with the problems that they would encounter. As a result an intensive group experience was designed in which the counselors learned ". . . better to understand themselves, to become aware of attitudes which might be self-defeating in the counseling relationship, and to relate to each other in ways that would be helpful and could carry over into their counseling work."[6]

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[5]Ibid., p. 2.

[6]Ibid., pp. 3-4.

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Both the experience of Lewin and of Rogers has formed the basis of the growth group today. "Thus the conceptual underpinnings of this whole movement were initially Lewinian thinking and Gestalt psychology on the one hand, and client-centered therapy on the other."[7]

GROUP THEORY

Over the years, since the primitive beginnings in 1947, the methodology of group work has become refined to such an extent that there are some basic considerations that have become essential to work in this area.[8] We will consider the role of the leader, the group environment, and the process of individual and of societal change.

Group Leader

No individual is more essential to the proper working of a growth group than is the group leader. "The key to any group's ability to release the people dynamic is the nature and quality of its leadership."[9] It is the function of the group leader to initiate the process of individual change within each of the group members, within

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[7]Ibid., p. 4.

[8]See also Robert C. Leslie, Sharing Groups in the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), and Thomas C. Oden, The Intensive Group Experience (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972).

[9]Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., The People Dynamic (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 36.

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the group itself, and hopefully as the group progresses some influence upon the society in which the group exists.

In order to get at the exact task of the group leader we will rely upon the three leadership roles as they were developed by Howard Clinebell.

> The leader-facilitator brings his know-how and person-hood to the group as resources for doing three things: (1) facilitating the growth of individual members; (2) developing a group climate and style of relating which release individual members and the group as a growth-stimulating organism; (3) continuing his own growth.[10]

These are the basic tasks of the leader as s/he seeks to relate to the various members of the growth group.

Facilitation of growth. One of the chief aims of the growth group is to facilitate the growth of the group members and this task rests primarily with the group leader. The leader creates a climate for growth not so much through actual teaching as through example. "The leader tries to be as self-revealing, caring, and trustful of the group as he would like them to be."[11]

The process of growth is facilitated as the leader assists the group in moving from superficial socializing to experiences of deeper sharing about feelings and responding to the feelings of others. The techniques of listening and of linking one person's experience or feeling to that expressed by another is especially beneficial to the task of growth. The leader encourages the group to

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[10]Ibid., pp. 36-37. [11]Ibid., p. 37.

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move from ". . . post-mortems of old failures, archaeologizing (digging in the past for explanations of present behavior), and pathologizing (focusing more on problems than potentials)"[12] to an emphasis upon the present and the future. The individual is challenged to work on present situations and to see that there is a potential for growth in present problems.

It is also the function of the leader to share expertise in communication skills. "When used appropriately, these tools can increase interaction, move a blocked group off dead center, and give access to hidden feelings."[13] Some of these tools can also be quite useful in helping individuals who need additional support or involvement in the group.

Group climate. Facilitation of growth would be an impossible task if there was not an appropriate climate within the group for growth. It is an important function of the leader to ensure that there is a growth inducing atmosphere. This leadership role will be discussed in greater depth when we discuss the second aspect of group theory which is the group environment.

Leader's growth. It is important that the leader also share in the growth experience of the group. To be effective, the leader cannot isolate himself from the

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[12]Ibid., p. 39. [13]Ibid., p. 40.

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growth process. As the leader risks and shares within the group s/he will be presenting a model for growth that will help others in the group to grow as well. The test of an effective growth group ". . . is whether or not it produces change in both the therapist and the patient."[14]

Group Environment

Just as important as the leader, is the environment for growth that the leader needs to create for the group. It is imperative that within the group there be a climate of acceptance, caring, sharing, and confidentiality. The group member needs to be free to share whatever is on her/his mind without the fear that what was said will be talked about out of the group.

Of equal importance is the necessity for confrontation. Within a context of sharing, an individual also needs to be confronted with the need for growth so that growth can take place. Clinebell shares a growth formula with us in this regard. "Caring + confrontation = growth!"[15]

There are also several other factors that are of importance in establishing the growth environment. The first of these is the length and frequency of meeting. This can vary from the twenty-four hour marathon session to the weekend retreat to the once a week meeting of two

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[14]Ibid., p. 37. [15]Ibid., p. 8.

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three hours for a month or two. No matter what length is elected, it is important that ". . . it provide sufficient frequency, intensity, and continuity of experience together so that the psychological process of becoming a group will operate."[16] It is also important in this regard to establish a specific termination date. Some persons will not commit themselves to an open-ended group experience but will agree to attend six to eight sessions. Additionally, "A closing date motivates earlier and more persistent growth work."[17]

Given the potential number of relationships in a group ranging from 28 relationships for a group of eight persons to 190 relationships for a group of twenty persons, it is necessary to limit the group size so that effective communications and growth can be established. Clinebell finds that ". . . seven to twelve members, plus leader or co-leaders, is an optimal number for a growth group."[18]

A final environmental consideration is in terms of the actual meeting place. It needs to be private so that people feel free to share openly, and have no interruptions such as telephones causing early departures. The meeting place should also be comfortable but not too comfortable. The room should be such that will encourage ". . . floor-sitting which somehow reduces stuffy, surface relating."[19]

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[16]Ibid., p. 18.

[17]Ibid., p. 19.

[18]Ibid., p. 21.

[19]Ibid., p. 23.

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The availability of coffee and of other refreshments is also conducive to a feeling of informality and of relaxation.

Process of Change

The basic function of the growth group is change. As Rogers sees it, the development of mutual trust within a growth group breaks down the individual's defensive rigidity so that ". . . the possibility of change in personal attitudes and behavior, in professional methods, in administrative procedures and relationships, becomes less threatening."[20] We will consider the processes of individual and of social change as they are brought about within the growth group.

Individual change. The first type of change that occurs within a growth group is the process of individual change. The growth group is not concerned with past problems and behaviors but rather, ". . . the sensitivity-type sharing group puts a premium on behavioral change."[21] There is a real concern for working on current problems and behaviors and the mood of the group is toward change in these areas. The aim is to help people ". . . to develop appropriate behavior in a new environment so that they can continue to be effective and creative."[22]

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[20]Rogers, p. 7. [21]Leslie, pp. 112-113.

[22]Thomas R. Bennett, II, The Leader and the Process of Change (New York: Association Press, 1962), p. 13.

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Individual change will occur when the stability of a given situation is altered in some way and the individual is motivated to grow in some way. The process of individual change is greatly enhanced when the climate within the group is supportive of change. The Clinebell formula of "caring + confrontation = growth" is the medium for individual change. Robert Leslie points out that most of the necessary individual change is due to ineffective interpersonal relationships. He writes:

> What is needed is a supportive atmosphere (i.e., an accepting group), an awareness of the pattern (i.e., a leader or group member who observes an ineffective pattern and comments on it), a challenge to change (i.e., a confrontation with the idea that a choice about behavior patterns is present), and an opportunity to try out new patterns (i.e., a group that supports and encourages hesitant and clumsy efforts at change).[23]

When these conditions are met within the growth group, the possibility for individual growth is greatly enhanced and will most probably take place.

Social change. Equally as important as individual change is the movement for societal change that will be derived from a truly effective group. Leslie writes that "effective groups are neither exclusively person-oriented nor exclusively task-oriented but combine features of both emphases."[24] The growth group that seeks to move beyond narcissism needs to look outward as well as inward.

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[23]Leslie, p. 29.

[24]Ibid.

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It is necessary for the group to move beyond just working on personal improvement and growth. A group that is only concerned with personal change tends to be escapist in nature. As Seifert and Clinebell note, personal growth should only ". . . be pushed to the point of reasonable personal adequacy. To continue polishing personalities beyond that point is a misuse of resources. . . ."[25] In terms of our religious heritage, ". . . personal growth which does not lead to greater concern for our sick society is lopsided growth. . . ."[26]

The concern within the group then is to balance individual change with a concern for societal change as well. As the group begins to reach beyond itself to concern for societal and organizational change, we need to become familiar with the action steps that a growth group would take in moving toward systemic change. Clinebell isolates five steps that are of especial importance for the implementation of change in society by the growth group.

The first step is to recruit and train a task force. Such a group whose efforts would bedirected at a specific change target would be best trained by growth group methods. To this end, it is important to create in the group an urgency for action. Clinebell notes that

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[25]Harvey Seifert and Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Personal Growth and Social Change (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 104.

[26]Ibid.

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"firsthand confrontation with the victims of social and economic oppression can awaken this crucial awareness."[27] The group also needs to be equipped with the skills necessary to operate effectively. Such skills as communication, risk-taking, and aggressiveness are of importance. A final part of training lies in the area of building a team. The group needs to share in decision-making and in evaluation of the team's efforts.

As the team is recruited and trained, the next phase centers on study and the formulation of action goals. The group needs to study a particular problem in order to arrive at some understanding as to which goals are the most feasible. The decision about goals needs to be made in consultation with the whole team.

A third step is to strategize. In this area, "decisions about how to accomplish goals, how to use resources, acquire allies, and divide responsibilities should also be made via the group process."[28]

The next phase is action by the group. During this step it is important to keep open the lines of communication ". . . so that misunderstandings, duplication of efforts, and working at cross-purposes will not impede effectiveness."[29]

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[27]Clinebell, p. 150.

[28]Ibid., p. 154.

[29]Ibid., p. 155.

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Following action, the group needs time to evaluate what has been done and to reformulate their goals and map out new strategy. Hopefully, by this stage, the team will be sufficiently versed in communication skills that an honest discussion of successes and failures can take place in a nonthreatening fashion.

As an individual moves and grows within the context of a growth group, the process of personal change leads to a concern for systemic evils that need correction. "Experience in an encounter group can set in motion profound changes within the individual person and his behavior; in a variety of human relationships; and in the policies and structure of an organization."[30]

TYPES OF GROUPS

The types of groups that are available for ready utilization within the church today are too numerous for detailed consideration within the pages of this project. We will instead focus our attention on three basic types that seem directly applicable to the question of deepening the sense of social responsibility within the contemporary church and relating it to personal piety. To this end, we will consider the spiritual growth group, the social action group, and those groups which blend the dual concerns of spiritual growth and social witness.

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[30]Rogers, p. 93.

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Spiritual Growth Groups

This type of the growth group is the one most obviously akin to the Methodist class meeting. Such a group has as its goal ". . . the deepening of the members' spiritual lives through experiencing a vital relationship with God."[31] Such groups utilize various means to arrive at the end of spiritual growth. Bible study, prayer, and discussion are all used as handles for growth. Despite the variety of techniques used, that which is common is ". . . their existence as small units in which people could be known by their first names and in which they could talk as well as listen."[32] The communication skills as well as the techniques of caring and sharing that were discussed earlier are also very much in evidence in this type of group.

As for the social witness dimension, it is quite often absent in this type of growth group. Spiritual growth seems to be an end in itself with no corresponding concern for social issues and problems. The spiritual growth group in and of itself is fine, but fails to confront in a decisive way the concern for personal piety and social witness.

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[31]Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., Mental Health Through Christian Community (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 160.

[32]Clyde Reid, Groups Alive - Church Alive (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 20.

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Social Action Groups

Like the spiritual growth group, the social action group is organized around just one concept. With the spiritual growth group that concept is personal peity, and with the social action group that concept is social witness only. The techniques of organizing for social witness have already been discussed above, however, all too often this type of group fails to be concerned about the lives of its members and is only concerned about a particular social concern. In order "to have the most constructive social change we also need positive changes in individuals."[33]

Spiritual Growth-Social Witness Groups

This dual function group is one that is concerned both with the spiritual growth and development of its members and with the concerns of society as a whole. Reid described such a group when he wrote:

> It served variously as a reading and discussion group, a group for the sharing of personal concerns and the hammering out of convictions on such things as the new morality, a place for celebrating some joyful event in a member's life, and, on occasion, for the promotion of social concerns. I remember well the joy our group shared with us on the birth of our second child, and I remember their kindness when we moved to another city to establish our home. We shared happy moments, but we also organized civil rights rallies and spearheaded the establishment of a housing "clinic" in mid-Harlem.[34]

Such a group organizes in order to grow personally and to

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[33]Seifert and Seifert, p. 9.

[34]Reid, pp. 20-21.

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be concerned for social issues. Generally, as the members grow and mature in their faith, they become concerned not only for themselves but for the world as well. "Furthermore, there is present in every small group the dynamic to do something about the social ills it confronts."[35]

It seems obvious then that the type of group which blends the concerns of social witness and of personal spirituality is this last type. It is ". . . concerned for others, vital, and genuinely involved in the world."[36]

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[35]Ibid., p. 21.

[36]Ibid., pp. 21-22.

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Chapter 4

CLASS MEETING AND GROWTH GROUP IN DIALOGUE

It is the function of this chapter to consider the lessons learned from the eighteenth century British Methodist class meeting and to relate those learnings to major aspects of modern small group theory. Largely because of psychological resources now available to us, we have learned much concerning the value and function of the group within the church as it relates to personal peity and social responsibility.

As we move into a consideration of utilizing a small group for spiritual growth and for social witness, we need to take a look at the insights gained from the class meeting and group theory today. It is hoped that we will thus be able to avoid past mistakes and to profit from successes.

CHURCHES AND SOCIETIES IN CONTRAST

Eighteenth century England and twentieth century America seem far removed from one another in terms of both church and society. Yet, as it will become obvious, even though the years separate us, the impact of the class meeting upon the Church of England and English society is not that much different than the impact of the spiritual growth group upon the contemporary American church and American society. Both impacted an entrenched church and

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society. Both societies and both churches shared some of the same problems and ills. Let us turn now to these similarities.

Society

England. England during the eighteenth century was a land of extreme disparities. On the one hand, it was a time for laying the foundations of the empire, for major industrial efforts, for advances in intellectual thought, and for relative peace and stability both internally and externally. Yet as Cameron notes, ". . . this imposing superstructure was built on a foundation of poverty and wretchedness which was none the less real for being inarticulate."[1]

The prosperity that appeared on the surface was maintained by a vast pool of poverty. The poor were there to maintain on a permanent basis the affluence and prosperity enjoyed by the nation as a whole.

It was a century of revolution. The first such revolution was the agricultural revolution which made it possible to increase the output of food and so made large farms profitable. Thus the poor small farmer was squeezed out of the market, and many small farms were put together to make a few large ones. The large landowners were then

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[1]Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 27.

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able through political backing to gain exclusive access to what had been common grazing land belonging to the villages.

The second revolution was the industrial revolution ". . . which drew the dispossessed to the manufacturing and mining centers to live out their toilsome lives in greater poverty and under conditions even more unwholesome than before."[2]

It was an age marked by drunkenness, gambling, and sexual promiscuity. Crime was the rule rather than the exception and punishment was harsh. "At one time during the century two hundred crimes, including the theft of two shillings from a shop, were punishable by hanging."[3]

Government was for the good of the few rather than for the masses. "Sir Robert Walpole, the first prime minister in the modern sense of the word (1721-1742), governed on the cynical principle that every man had his price."[4]

Yet in the midst of the evils and inequities of the time, there were philanthropic efforts. Religious societies founded homes for the orphans, schools for the poor, and involved themselves in penal reform. This then was England in the eighteenth century.

America. We can certainly see many parallels between eighteenth century English society and that of twentieth century America. However, it would not be

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[2]Ibid., p. 28. [3]Ibid., p. 29. [4]Ibid.

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entirely accurate to draw too many direct parallels.

Robert Hudnut cites some striking statistics about America today which strikingly point out the disparities that are present in our society as they were in British society.

> The average American is taxed $402.08 for arms. He is taxed $2.52 for food to feed his fellow citizens. . . .
>
> Seventy-five percent of American Indian families have cash incomes of less than $3,000 a year. . . .
>
> Thirteen and four-tenths percent of America is below the poverty level. That's an urban family of four living on less than $3,300 a year. . . .
>
> Fifteen nations have higher literacy rates. Ten nations have lower infant mortality rates. Half the poor have no medical insurance.
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> . . . . . .
>
> Our defense budget has doubled every decade. It was $20 billion in 1950, $40 billion in 1960, and $80 billion in 1970.
>
> Six percent of the world, namely America, has 50 percent of the wealth. Six percent of the world will live until the age of 71; the rest of the world will, on the average, be dead before they are 40.
>
> Over 56,000 people a year are killed on the highways, more than half of them drinking drivers.
>
> The bottom 20 percent of all families received 5 percent of the income in 1946. By 1967 the same 20 percent--now 40 million people--received 5.4 percent of the income. Meanwhile the top 5 percent receive 20 percent.[5]

Another possible parallel is the revolutionary times in which we live. Technological advances, the rise of the Third World, ethnic groups, and female liberation are producing additional widespread and basic changes in our society.

As it is obvious we do have social problems in

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[5]Robert K. Hudnut, The Sleeping Giant (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 24-25.

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America. It needs to be mentioned, however, that we have not even mentioned racial discrimination, sexism, pornography, crime, and violence. Maybe our society does sound a lot like eighteenth century England after all.

Church

English church. The role of the English church during the eighteenth century was just as discouraging as were the conditions of that time. During those times of comparative religious toleration yet with still some annoyances, "the Baptists and Independents had maintained their Calvinistic orthodoxy firmly enough; but that orthodoxy was devoid of religious feeling or social passion."[6] The Presbyterians were suffering losses due to Deism and a current form of Arianism.

The Church of England suffered from many of the same defects as the British government since the two were so closely tied. Thus the church had no concern at all for the poor. Certainly the church's greatest failing was due to ". . . its failure to manifest any concern for the increasing pressure of need among common people facing changing social conditions."[7] The church's practices of pastoral care in ministering to the poor were largely unchanged despite their inadequacy.

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[6]Cameron, p. 29.

[7]Ibid., p. 30.

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The church demanded little of its members ". . . beyond the payment of their rates, passive conformity, and attendance on service from time to time."[8] However, this was a condition to be expected since the majority of the bishops were chosen not for their religious leadership but rather for their political affiliation. Even many of the parishes were staffed with absentee clergy who collected the salary while curates were left to do the work. It is not surprising then that spiritual life in the church left a lot to be desired.

American church. The indictment against the contemporary church is just as serious as the one against the English church. Robert Hudnut's hard words are indicative of this sad but true fact:

> So the church is finding that it is full of perjurers. We have stood up in front of hundreds of witnesses and have said that we "confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior." But there are people in churches who never crack the Bible, never pray with each other, never do anything for racial justice. Half the world goes to bed hungry, according to the UN; and the church's response is a few boxcars of powdered milk at Easter. Two-thirds of the world is not Christian; and the church's response is a nickel per member per week to foreign missions.
>
> The standards of a Boy Scout troop are higher than those of the Christian church. If you miss four times at a service club, you're out. If you fail to show up for work, you're fired.[9]

This then is a brief description of the church in America. It appears to be a church that is just as unfeeling and as insensitive to the needs of others as the English church

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[8]Ibid. [9]Hudnut, pp. 2-3.

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many years prior in Wesley's time. There may not be widespread corruption within the clergy, but there is a considerable amount of mediocrity and compromise with the greater concentrations of social power in our time.

Given the parallels between the two societies and the failures of the two churches to meet the needs of those societies both spiritually and in ways of social witness, it is now time to look at an agent for church renewal and for social responsibility. In Wesley's time that was the class meeting and in our time it is the growth group.

LESSONS LEARNED

The class meeting in Wesley's time operated within a church and a society that in many ways are remarkably similar to the church and society of our time. We have much to learn from that early experience of renewal in terms of successes and failures as the class sought to bring together the two concerns of personal piety and social responsibility. Likewise, there are many significant contributions that contemporary group theory can make to an understanding of the group process. Let us now turn to a discussion of the lessons learned and a possible synthesis of the two that will cross the years and provide us an even more powerful instrument than either of these have been alone.

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Class Meeting Contributions

The class meeting has several important contributions to make to our understanding of the functioning of the small group within the church. First is the sharing fellowship. The class members met weekly to share their experiences in living the Christian faith. Attendance was considered to be highly important at the sessions where each individual was asked the state of her/his life. Another part of the sharing fellowship was the willingness of the class members to submit themselves to a group evaluation.

A second contribution is in the area of lay leadership. The class was led by lay persons which further emphasized the belief in the "priesthood of all believers." It is this feature which enabled the laity to have full participation in the life of the church.

A major contribution by the class meeting is found in their availability to all the church. The class meeting was actively promoted by the leadership both during the Wesleyan Revival and during the early stages of becoming a church. Unlike the class meeting, however, the modern growth group is available in only a small minority of churches.

Another important contribution is the conscious theological basis for the class meeting. The class was a practical laboratory for working out in the individual's

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life, the doctrine of Christian perfection. Love of God and love of neighbor was practiced in the class. In the class meeting, Biblical resources were used, the class members prayed together, and they sang together. Through these means of worshipping and theologizing together, they were very conscious of the presence and the power of God. This theological awareness is a factor that is often lacking in current growth groups.

A final contribution is the acceptance of social responsibility by the class. As it has been noted earlier, we can find no direct evidence for the relationship between the class and their social witness. However, this work in society by the class members is an indirect result of each person's attempt to work out her/his own salvation. It was a direct application of the teachings of John Wesley on Christian perfection.

Contemporary Theory Contributions

Contemporary group theory also has several contributions to make to our understanding of the small group. The group needs to establish early the time frame in which it will meet. In this fashion, the hazard of ingrownness which plagued the class meeting can be avoided. There will be an opportunity after several weeks of meeting together for the groups to reorganize and make new contacts if there are several such groups in the church. It is not necessarily anticipated that any person will indefinitely remain

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in such a group, since we have a variety of other educational, worship, and action resources that were not available in Wesley's time. Additionally, by only meeting for a limited time, the spirit of vitality and of growth will not be lost while the group will also not become a schismatic or divisive element within the church.

We have also seen that the size of the group is of crucial importance. Due to the possible large number of relationships within a group, it is crucial to keep the group at a size not larger than twelve plus the leader(s).

Also of importance is the need to have a group that is open, caring, sharing, and supportive as well as confidential. These factors are necessary if the group is to grow in terms of its interpersonal relationships and its relationship to society. The function of the leader is especially crucial here in order to ensure the adherence to these principles. Although these principles were evidenced in Wesley's time, today we have perhaps a better understanding of the dimensions of fellowship and of the methods by which this relationship can be cultivated.

The group also needs to be multi-purpose. As Robert Leslie notes, "effective groups are neither exclusively person-oriented nor exclusively task-oriented but combine features of both emphases."[10] The group needs to not only look inward but to also look outward at society

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[10]Robert C. Leslie, Sharing Groups In the Church (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 29.

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and its relationships and problems. Growth needs to occur not only in the group but in the relationship of the group and its individual members to society. The group can provide the strength and the purpose for getting at those social problems and evils that need to be corrected. This would mean greater self-consciousness about social change, and more explicit emphasis on social reform as well as social welfare measures.

A final contribution of the modern growth group is its pluralism. The growth group today has the ability to meet varying individual needs, while the class meeting had a basic standardized structure of a single type. Thus, the class meeting had to fill a variety of individual and social needs with a single format while today the growth group is free to change its emphasis and format as human needs and interests vary.

Synthesis and Recommendations

The contemporary growth group and its historical antecedent the class meeting can be an effective instrument for spiritual awakening in the contemporary church and for giving impetus to the social responsibility of the church. We have learned much from the class meeting and from the growth group. These learnings can create within the church one group or a variety of such groups for the dual purpose of spiritual growth and of social witness. A more powerful social witness could grow out of a deeper spiritual

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experience as the realization emerges within the group process that the Christian faith is concerned with all of the world and not just the individual.

It is important to realize that the encounter group is not something new but rather is a reoccurence of an historical phenomenon that began with Spener in the seventeenth century. Oden calls it "the new pietism."[11]

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[11]Thomas C. Oden, The Intensive Group Experience (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 13.

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